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WAR-MAID OF MARS A Novel of Revolt Among the Stars
by POUL ANDERSON

DOOMSDAY 257 A. G.! Novelet by BRYCE WALTON

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, NO. 6

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

MAY, 1952

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T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

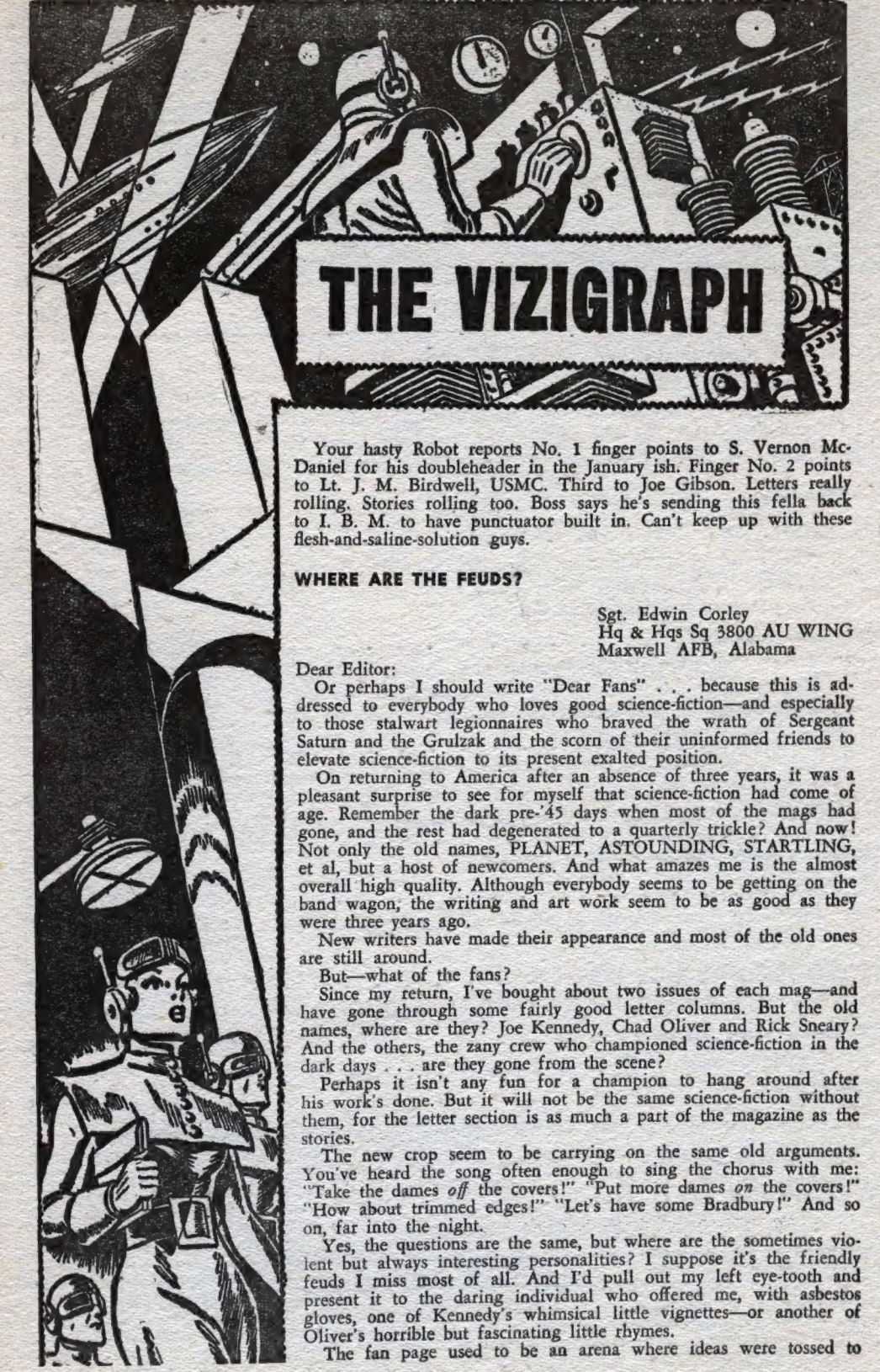
MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 130 West 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1952, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 25¢ per copy. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 130 West 42 St., New York 18, N. Y.



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PRINTED IN U. S. A.



THE VIZIGRAPH

Your hasty Robot reports No. 1 finger points to S. Vernon McDaniel for his doubleheader in the January ish. Finger No. 2 points to Lt. J. M. Birdwell, USMC. Third to Joe Gibson. Letters really rolling. Stories rolling too. Boss says he's sending this fella back to I. B. M. to have punctuator built in. Can't keep up with these flesh-and-saline-solution guys.

WHERE ARE THE FEUDS?

Sgt. Edwin Corley
Hq & Hqs Sq 3800 AU WING
Maxwell AFB, Alabama

Dear Editor:

Or perhaps I should write "Dear Fans" . . . because this is addressed to everybody who loves good science-fiction—and especially to those stalwart legionnaires who braved the wrath of Sergeant Saturn and the Grulzak and the scorn of their uninformed friends to elevate science-fiction to its present exalted position.

On returning to America after an absence of three years, it was a pleasant surprise to see for myself that science-fiction had come of age. Remember the dark pre-'45 days when most of the mags had gone, and the rest had degenerated to a quarterly trickle? And now! Not only the old names, PLANET, ASTOUNDING, STARTLING, et al, but a host of newcomers. And what amazes me is the almost overall high quality. Although everybody seems to be getting on the band wagon, the writing and art work seem to be as good as they were three years ago.

New writers have made their appearance and most of the old ones are still around.

But—what of the fans?

Since my return, I've bought about two issues of each mag—and have gone through some fairly good letter columns. But the old names, where are they? Joe Kennedy, Chad Oliver and Rick Sneary? And the others, the zany crew who championed science-fiction in the dark days . . . are they gone from the scene?

Perhaps it isn't any fun for a champion to hang around after his work's done. But it will not be the same science-fiction without them, for the letter section is as much a part of the magazine as the stories.

The new crop seem to be carrying on the same old arguments. You've heard the song often enough to sing the chorus with me: "Take the dames off the covers!" "Put more dames on the covers!" "How about trimmed edges!" "Let's have some Bradbury!" And so on, far into the night.

Yes, the questions are the same, but where are the sometimes violent but always interesting personalities? I suppose it's the friendly feuds I miss most of all. And I'd pull out my left eye-tooth and present it to the daring individual who offered me, with asbestos gloves, one of Kennedy's whimsical little vignettes—or another of Oliver's horrible but fascinating little rhymes.

The fan page used to be an arena where ideas were tossed to

battle to the death. Presently, it reminds me of a stiff game of checkers. This is perhaps in favor of the present, more dignified readers—but wotthehell, I'm not particularly dignified, and I wanna hop down in the pit and rattle me a few lions!

Maybe I'm out of line in this new age where science-fiction is read by high-school kids, street car conductors, mining engineers, stout matrons with little fuzzy pooches, servicemen, dignified scholars, professional roller skaters, fishermen, cops, doctors, radio announcers, actors, science-fiction editors, fraternity house mothers, shipping clerks and odd characters named Corley who appear out of the past and want to turn back the clock.

But that's the way it stands. I'm years behind, back there holding hands with THE STAR MOUSE and THE LAST MONSTER . . . and looking at the bold drawings by Murphy Anderson, with additional dialogue by Leigh Brackett.

After I've read four or five issues, maybe I'll catch up. Right now I don't want to . . . but I'll probably change my mind. Opium should help. Then, again . . . who knows? Maybe this silly wail has started some secret mechanism, far out in the night . . . Made the purple indicators flash and flash as a dark figure huddles over an ancient typewriter, and the voice of JOKE is heard in the land.

But until then, despite my complaints, boys and girls, it's damned good to be back!

EDWIN CORLEY

P. S.—Pics to Tuning, Ryan and Stone, in that order. (Sorry, Mike, you came close, but—) E. C.

Ed's note: You missed some free-for-alls that would have shook your teeth loose. I imagine there are some more small riots in the making.

ON HUMAN NATURE

55 Taylor Ave.,
East Keansburg, N. J.

Dear Editor:

Well-guided missiles and ill-guided missives rain about me, but true to the precepts of "Invictus," my head is bloody but unbowed. To arms!

There is a type of literary snobbery of which most of us have been guilty at some time or another. It goes like this—"Joe Doakes is a personal friend of mine. He is a swell guy. I have read everything he has ever written. He is a great writer."

Now I freely admit that I have never met Ray Bradbury. I know practically nothing about him. Though I have been reading his stories for many years, starting back in WEIRD TALES, I also freely admit that I have not read *everything* he has written, but I have read enough to see that he has definitely over-worked the death-motif and his many variations on "Man is a louse not worth saving." At the risk of sounding redundant I repeat that he is a superb craftsman, and I wish he would some time write a story about man being the pretty swell Joe that, on the whole, he is.

So that William Nolan does not feel bad about my "ingratitude" as a fan, I should like to explain that I am not a fan in the accepted sense of that word. I do not collect STF or fantasy, feeling that they are very much over-priced for the worth of their contents. Very few books in this field are worth their cost. Magazines are worth their initial cost, but not the ridiculous amounts they bring after a few years. I am a somewhat more vociferous specimen of the average reader, who buys the mags month after month, but doesn't belong to any fan club or subscribe to any fanzine. As the circulation department can tell you, there are more of us than of the dyed-in-the-wool fans.

There is not much point in arguing about art with the many readers who have jumped on me about my too-optimistic remark that no one was left who believed in art for art's sake. I should have realized that with so many young readers there would be many who would believe just that. In fifteen or twenty years let them come around and I might argue the point if they are still not convinced.

As for the changing of human nature—there we have a more or less permanent argument. In my opinion human nature is a constantly-changing thing, but I know many people don't agree with me. Nor has it always been changed for the better. Sometimes, as in the case of the Nazis, a whole people have had their "human nature" changed for the worse. If anyone cares to dispute that point, go to it.

On the whole humanity has come a long way, and has still a long way to go. Considering the distance we have traveled, I think we will get there eventually, and all in one piece, and to do that human nature will have to go on changing for the better. Do any of you *honestly* feel that it won't?

(Mrs.) MARY WALLACE CORBY

Ed's note: Sure human nature is improving, but is it improving fast enough?

BRADBURY? GOOD . . . BAD . . . NEVER INDIFFERENT

1455 Townsend Ave.,
New York 52, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

By the looks of the January VIZIGRAPH, another Bradbury feud is on the way. It seems that Bradbury's stories arouse such emotion in some people that they become frantic about either building him up or tearing him down. In a way, this is understandable, since many fans regard Bradbury as Fandom's Boy, having risen from the ranks of the fans to become a well-known author. Here is an example any fan can point to when hard-pressed by a Nonbeliever who has dared to say that STF is junk. Also, since most scientificationists are would-be writers, they are heartened by Bradbury's success. And so the actual issue—whether he is a good writer or a bad one—becomes distorted.

Marilyn Venable says that Bradbury is one of the greatest writers of his generation. William F. Nolan, in his lengthy letter on the subject, makes it clear that he holds very much the same opinion. And I know of many people who would agree with them.

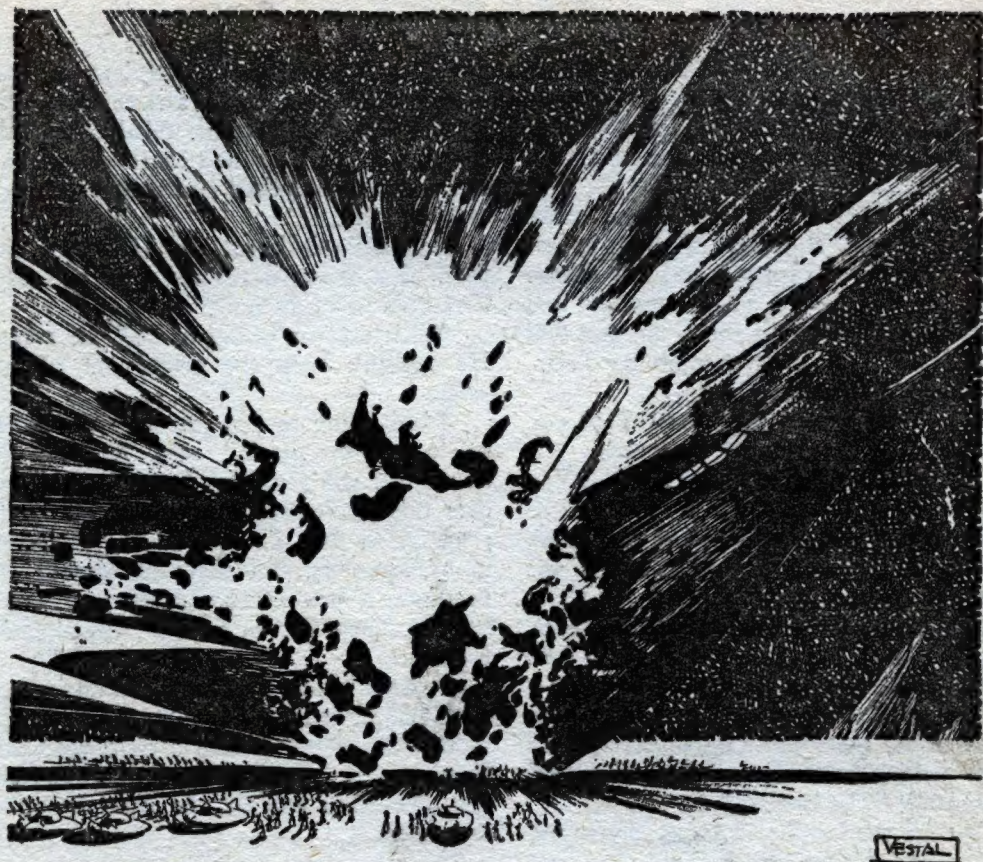
But let's see what we have to judge Bradbury by. According to William's count there are 155 Bradbury stories in print. Doubtlessly, this number will have been increased somewhat in the next few months, as two more of his books are scheduled for publication soon and he probably has some stories coming up in various magazines. I contend that due to the nature of most of this output we cannot regard it as representative of Bradbury's true worth, of what he will write in the future.

First of all, let us remember that the first years of a writer are the formative ones and that Bradbury has been writing professionally for only ten years or so. A young writer is usually influenced by the work of literary figures who preceded him. Bradbury has obviously been much influenced by the style of Hemingway, his earlier stories in particular show it.

I feel that we cannot use his stories of six or seven years ago as a guide to his stories of today and tomorrow. This would be unfair to Bradbury himself, for nothing could be more misleading than

(Continued on page 91)





WAR-MAID OF MARS

A Novel of Fallen Worlds by POUL ANDERSON

The Man of Science must be judge and soldier. Reluctant Lars Fredison fumbled the fate of two worlds in his energy-lined pocket. Should he side the thin Martian remnants, the hated Owlies? Or, like a loyal Earthman, should he throw in with thick-chinned Clinton's Terran hound-pack?

THE man came into the laboratory and shut the door behind him against a blast of wind. He was a stranger, and he had a gun in one hand.

"Who the hell are you?" demanded Fredison.

"Call me Jones," said the man. The smile was thin and unpleasant on his frost-whitened cheeks. "And don't move, please. There's no one else for a thousand miles of

Antarctic and I wouldn't hesitate to kill you."

Fredison stood rigid. For an instant only the muted howl of wind was heard in the room. It was a long room, brightly lit, cluttered with apparatus. Fredison stood behind a table bearing a wall of equipment, with a good five yards of open floor beyond it to the stranger.

"There must be some mistake," he said

thickly, and the sudden wild throb of blood in his ears told him he was a liar. "I never saw you in my life. This is the Raihala Energy Lab. You've got no business with me."

"But I do, Dr. Fredison." Jones spoke tonelessly, with a shiver of iron in his voice. "I'm here to get you and that energy globe, but the globe is more important and if you make trouble I'll shoot you and find it for myself. I'm a pretty fair lab technician, among other things."

"Who sent you?" whispered Fredison. The wind mumbled under his words.

"Where is the globe? Quickly, now! You can't buck the forces you're up against."

The man's eyes drifted along the room, back to Fredison's table, and caught the reflected shimmer of light from the thing that lay before him. "That's it, right there, that must be it. All right, pick it up in both hands. Come over to me slowly."

"You can't do this and get away with it." Useless, melodramatic gibberish, with death looking hollowly out of an unwavering muzzle. "The law . . ."

"We are the law," said Jones contemptuously. "At least, we will be very soon, and we remember our enemies. I'd advise co-operation."

THE slow realization came. "You're from the Unionists," breathed Fredison. "You must be."

"All right, get moving." Jones jerked a thumb at him.

Fredison picked up the globe. It was small, some three inches in diameter, but it was cold and heavy in his hands. The reflection of the laboratory wavered in distortion over its surface. He came around from behind the table. "You don't know what you're doing," he said frantically. "You don't realize what a power you're tampering with."

"On the contrary," answered Jones evenly, "we're the only ones on Earth who do know what we're about."

Fredison shook his head, wonderingly. It had, perhaps, been a mistake to come here alone—but who could have known it, who could have looked for it? He had never imagined that the Unionist bosses had the faintest idea of Raihala's tremendous achievement. When the robowatcher sig-

naled an approaching rocketplane he had merely assumed it to be a flyer off course in the Antarctic blizzard. Glad of a little company in the night and loneliness, he had left the door unlocked and then gone back to his studies.

Unionists—O Lord, the Unionists, the party of hate and death and nescience. The Unionists had him now.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. He couldn't keep the fright out of his voice.

"I am going to put you and this globe safely in my plane," said Jones, "and then I am going to wait here, maybe look over this interesting setup, until the others come. After that, I suppose, you'll be taken to headquarters. But don't be afraid, Dr. Fredison, if you aren't stubborn you won't be hurt. There'll even be some fine rewards for you."

Fredison nodded. "I see." He halted, a couple of yards from the other men, and the sudden decision was like a calming hand. Death—well, he was no braver than anyone else, but death was not the worst thing in the universe.

"No," he said.

"Any heroics will only result in your own unnecessary killing," said Jones. There was a vicious bite in the words.

Fredison shook his head, smiling. "You don't understand," he said gently. "Before you came I activated the globe. It's in a state of unstable equilibrium now. If it suffers any shock—well, there are five kilos of pure energy that will be released. A big hole in the ground. A hell of a big hole."

"You're lying!" It was a sudden screech from a distorted mouth. The man started forward, knuckles whitening on his pistol grip, and Fredison raised the globe over his head.

"Try it and see," he invited. "Shoot me and watch the sphere drop."

Jones stood unmoving, trembling beneath his heavy clothes. There was a fine mist of sweat on his gaunt face. "I don't believe it," he muttered. "You're not a fanatic. You wouldn't dare."

"No, I'm not a crusader of any kind, Jones, but I vote the Liberal ticket. I don't like Unionists. If the lab goes up, with all Raihala's equipment and notes, it may take a hundred years to duplicate his work. By

that time the Unionists and their kind may be extinct."

"I'm not afraid to die either," said Jones.

"No, but you are afraid to lose the globe, aren't you? This is the biggest chance your party has had since the Hemispheric Wars, isn't it? You don't want to miss a chance to take over the whole Solar System. You'd rather bargain with me than take a chance on calling what may be my bluff." Fredison's voice came with a vast and unnatural steadiness, some hidden source of strength he had never known was in him kept his tones level and faintly amused. "You see, I don't mind suggesting that it may be a bluff because I happen to know that it isn't. So it doesn't really matter what you do."

The wind hooted around the building. The walls shivered ever so slightly with its violence.

"Look," said Jones, "let's be reasonable. Let's talk it over."

"Sure. If you put that gun down."

The Unionist stooped and laid it on the floor. "You see," he said as he bent, "I'm not such a wild-eyed fanatic as you think. I'm quite willing to talk."

Now—*now!*

JONES straightened up, driving forward in a football motion. Fredison had expected him to try something of the sort—a quick grab, seizure of the globe before it could hit the floor. He dodged aside, letting the shoulder graze his belly. The sphere fell from his hands and bounced from Jones' clutch, thudding to the boards.

Fredison kicked at the stooping man's jaw. It was a savage, heavy-shoed kick that connected with a crunch of bone. The Unionist screamed. Fredison kicked him again and he lay still.

Shaking, suddenly uncontrollable in his trembling, Fredison sank to the floor beside him. Gods, gods, gods, it had worked. His bluff had worked!

If it hadn't, O almighty powers of space, if it hadn't worked, if Jones had won. . .

Gasping, Fredison dragged himself erect and stumbled over to a drawer and took out a bottle of whiskey. The stuff splashed as he brought it to his lips. It was raw in his throat and he choked and sputtered and took another drag.

Steadiness came, a thrumming urgency of purpose that would not let him rest. Jones had spoken of others on their way, a swarm of thugs and ice-hearted scientists who would make short shrift of him. He had to get out.

He looked around the laboratory and sighed. Pity to destroy a good ten million dollars' worth of magnificent equipment, the notes and the machines and the instruments, the whole labor of a heroic lifetime. But there must be nothing for the Unionists to find, and Raihala's essential results were still alive in Fredison's brain and in the thing which lay shining and mysterious on the floor.

With shaky speed he gathered the papers in the center of the floor and poured kerosene over them, touching his cigaret-lighter to the heap. It blazed up, red and smoky, the greatest achievement of the century burning before his eyes. It was as if he saw Raihala's thin stooped ghost wavering in the fire.

We'll keep it alive, Doc, we'll keep it alive and see that it's used right. Men won't have to curse your name, Doc.

Jones stirred, moaning out of a bloody mouth. Fredison found some rope and tied him securely. Then he went into the cellar and located the rest of the tordenite that had been used to blast the foundations of the laboratory. He set a twenty-minute fuse and went upstairs again.

Clothes against the Antarctic winter. . . But where to go, where to go? He had worried before now about the discovery, how it would be used, what sort of titanic struggle might shape up over possession of the demon which Raihala had bottled. Now—whom could he trust, where could he hide, what could he do?

The government? No, not if it could be avoided. The Liberals had a majority in the Federation parliament, but it was not a big one, there were Unionists holding important posts. Especially, and most disastrously, the Minister of Internal Security was known to have Unionists leanings. Nor were all the Liberals or the members of smaller parties shining knights. Earth's government was a shaky coalition of a dozen warring elements, corrupt in too many vital places. There was hardly a one in it he would trust with a counterfeit nickel, let alone the basic

sun-creating force of the universe.

Paris—yes, Astier was in Paris, a good man with an apartment roomy enough to hold him for a while. Astier had worked with Raihala a few years back, appreciated the issues involved, had contacts. He'd go there.

He stopped to poke up the fire, make sure that the thick sheafs of paper were safely charring. Not that the explosion would leave anything to read, but you never knew, you never knew.

The energy globe was chill in his sweating hand as he picked it up and stuck it in one capacious pocket. Five kilos—eleven pounds of hell chained and raging to be free. Five kilos of mastery over the worlds. His tunic sagged with the weight, the future dragging at his shoulders.

He stuck Jones' pistol in his belt and, grunting, picked up the mumbling man. The door swung open for him as he stumbled toward it. There was a storm door beyond it, shaking in the gale, and when it opened the polar night came in and struck him in the face.

A veil of snow plastered itself on his glasses. He cursed, wishing he had remembered to take them off, but he didn't dare stop, the fuse was burning down. Doggedly he stepped outside.

The wind screamed, galloping over nighted miles with snow and ice-dust sleeting before it. The cold was like a fang, ripping through his clothes, flaming in his cheeks. Blindly, he groped toward the landing field. His feet sank into a bitterness of snow. He slipped on the ancient ice beneath it. Darkness and cold and a wildness of wind, the enemy lancing through the gale toward him, destruction burning to its climax behind, he had to be on his way!

Dimly, he saw Jones' rocketplane ahead, already half buried by snow. He fumbled over its hull, feeling after the doorhandle. No time to get his own vessel out of the hangar and this one was probably faster anyway.

THE door swung open to a narrow darkness. Fredison shoved Jones behind the pilot seat, crawled into place, and slammed the door with a sobbing gasp. He was there. He was on his way.

The baffled wind screeched about the metal shell, which trembled as if poisoning for flight already. Doggedly, Fredison wiped his glasses clean and checked the instrument panel. Atomic drive—good, he had no fuel worries and he knew that this make could get into the upper stratosphere and carry him at fantastic speed. He touched the controls and heard the engines thutter, warming up. A breath of hot air blew from the heater against his numbed skin.

The night fountained up in a blaze of fury, sudden sheets of leaping fire, a roar that cut through the storm and banged on his eardrums and rattled the teeth in his skull. There went the lab, there went fifty years of labor, there went Raihala's tenuous ghost splattered and streaming away like smoke. . .

No, no, that wasn't right. If anything survived after death, if there was such a spirit remaining of the gentle old man, then it was riding with him now. And beside it, perhaps, were the shades of Newton and Faraday and Einstein and all the quiet-voiced great of Earth who had seen their dreams turned to murder. He smiled and sent the rocket skyward.

They were up into the enormous stillness of the stratosphere, stars blinking fierce in a cloudless night and only the throb of the rockets having voice, before he relaxed. Then it was into a trembling which lasted for minutes before he had control again.

Jones croaked behind him, trying to form words with a broken jaw. Fredison turned around and smiled without humor.

"I'd bandage you up if I could," he said, "but there doesn't seem to be anything here to do it with. Meanwhile, I've read too many detective stories where the one party has got the other one captured and then gets careless. You're going to stay hogtied in spite of every excuse you can think of. So shut up and let me think."

The autopilot was running the plane now, guiding it through the upper heavens at a speed which should get him to Paris in ten hours or so. Fredison took off his glasses—he needed them only for close work—and lit a cigaret and put his chilled wet feet close to the heater. Yes, there was a lot of thinking to do. A hell of a lot.

It was so incredible that he, plain unadventurous Lars Eric Fredison, Ph.D. in

physics, twenty-seven years old, North American by birth and Liberal by politics and middle class by income, that *he* should be caught in a sudden game of murder and struggle, that it had a dreamlike quality. This wasn't real, such things don't happen outside books and stereoshows, any minute now he'd wake up. . .

No, no, the rockets rumbled and flamed behind him, the stars were hard and sharp outside the windows, hooded lights on the control panel glowed dully off polished metal and plastic. He had an itch in his right shoulder just out of scratching range, the cigaret smoke tickled his nostrils, the logarithm of π was 0.49715, he had fixed himself mashed potatoes and hamburger steak over a Bunsen burner just two hours—two eternities—ago. He was real and this was real and he was in it up to the ears. . .

He sighed and considered his own potentialities. He was of medium height, stocky and broad-shouldered, a fair-to-middling boxer and halfback, not hopelessly bad on a pistol range. His head was large, sandy-haired, with gray eyes and wide mouth and stubborn chin and a few freckles dusted over a snub nose, nothing to mark it out. He had a growing reputation as an experimental physicist in the electronic and magnetronic field, and he had been Edvard Raihala's assistant in the Antarctic laboratory before age had taken the brilliant and kindly Finn. He had borne the body to Helsinki and returned to clean up what little remained to do.

They were almost finished with the work, they had produced an energy sphere and needed only to get exact numerical values for certain of its properties before announcing the results. Raihala had never liked preliminary reports, he wanted to show the world a *fait accompli*. He had been quite unconcerned with the political implications which had occasionally worried Fredison.

"No, no, Lars, you are too narrow, you do not see de wision. Man hass needed dis, to free him from hiss limitations. Unlimited energy! No more worry and fighting ower dwindling fuel suppliess, de wery stars before us now." Only it hadn't worked that way. The political implications had been dumped right in his lap and what was he going to do about it? Yes, what was he going to do about it?

JONES mumbled behind him. "Shut up," said Fredison.

"Owwr—yuh ca' ge' 'way—"

"I said shut up," repeated Fredison mildly. "The only reason I've bothered to lug you along is that I don't want a murder rap to add to my woes and give your side an excuse to fall on me. It wouldn't be too much trouble to dump you into the Atlantic."

It was strange that he should feel so ruthless. He had never killed a man in his life. But all the human race was pretty hard-boiled these days, the slowly dying hangover of the Hemispheric Wars. For one of the gang which had torn the world apart for a hundred years of hell, whose secret police and concentration camps and torture cells were still a livid memory, who had earned the hate of Mars and Venus for all their kind, and who sought to bring back the old viciousness in a new and subtler disguise, there could be no mercy. You step on scorpions, don't you?

Well, that might be an over simplification. The Unionist Party included a number of sincere, fairly decent, and hopelessly prejudiced people. You can't have totalitarianism all over the world, fascist and communist and nationalist and the nominal democracy which fought them, without leaving traces. Theoretically, the Unionists were simply another party, and if certain things they advocated were contrary to the Federation constitution, well, they claimed they would only seek to amend it by legal means.

But they stood for the end of the painfully won and still shaky freedom of man, the return of the secret police and the marching men, for an arrogant assumption of race superiority and the renewed oppression of Mars and Venus and human minorities. They were the heirs of the monster which had so lately been slain, first in open war and then in world-wide revolution and then in a series of bitterly contested elections.

They kept their private armies, swaggering bullies parading the streets in open defiance of the laws. They assassinated higher-up opponents and kicked in the teeth of harmless little men who dared speak against them. They were the largest of the minority parties in the Federation parliament, their demagogues howling up the votes of the

unemployed and the prejudiced and the psychopathic. If Raihala's demon fell into their hands there was an end of all things which mattered.

And I—I am up against that! What to do? What to do?

The tension faded, died in Fredison's weary body. He was of a somewhat stolid disposition anyway and if there was nothing else to do right now, well, why not catch a nap? He checked Jones with elaborate care and dozed off.

The renewed thrum of rockets as the plane came gliding earthward woke him. He stretched stiffly, wishing for a plate of ham and eggs and several gallons of coffee, and looked ahead. Europe was below him, Paris, a million lights in a starry summer darkness. The Antarctic seemed incredibly far away.

"Jones," he said, "we're going to land in the usual manner and take a cab to the place of an associate of mine. I'm going to be helping you along. You're a friend of mine who got banged up when we swerved to avoid a collision. If you try to say anything there will be a regrettable accident involving a gun I didn't know was loaded."

Hatred glared starkly back at him.

He found the usual license papers in the glove compartment; made out to Henry Jones of New Denver, North America—an alias if ever there was one. When the control tower at the rocketfield called to him, he answered firmly in passable French, "Lars Fredison of North America, with Henry Jones of the same in plane belonging to the latter. Request permission to land, and please have a cab ready. There's been an accident. I want to take Jones to the doctor."

"*Oui, monsieur.*" Was there an overtone of excitement, or was it simply his own jumpiness? Too late now, the radiobeam had already taken over and was bringing him down. He turned in his seat and untied Jones. "I've got the gun in my pocket, and my hand on the trigger," he said. "Don't forget."

The man shrugged. It was as if his crushed face sneered.

The plane set down on the glare-lit concrete expanse and rolled to a halt near one gate. A couple of mechanics stood by to

shove it into a hangar and a car was just pulling up beyond the fence. Good.

Jones leaned heavily on Fredison as they clumped out of the door. The scientist wondered vaguely how to shoot a man and make it look accidental. But the Unionist would be too weakened to offer much resistance to anything. What the hell to do with him once they got to Astier's was another question.

Two men got out of the car and approached. It wasn't a cab Fredison saw with a sudden horrible sinking.

One of them stood before him, a big blocky form cutting him off from the gate. His face was as if carved in dark granite.

"Fredison?" He spoke English with a clear American accent. "I am from Security." Briefly he showed the badge under his coat. "I have a warrant for your arrest."

II

FOR a wild instant the physicist's finger tightened on the gun in his pocket. Shoot them down?

Sanity returned and with it an immense weariness. He hadn't a chance. He was one against three, no, against the entire personnel of the rocketfield. There wasn't a thing he could do except make more trouble for himself.

His eyes went dully past the detective, searching without hope. Under a white blaze of lights, the concrete stretched over acres to the sprawling buildings at the far end. Transcontinental and transoceanic airliners were landing, taking off, disgorging the commerce of a world, a rush and a swarm of humanity half a mile from the nearly deserted area marked off for private craft. A tractor was hauling a giant American freighter to its hangar. An express to China spouted flame and thunder, stood on its tail, and climbed for the sky. Beyond the fence lay darkness.

There weren't many people near him. A couple of laughing, tipsy Frenchmen climbing out of a low-powered Fiat. Half a dozen coveralled mechanics going about their business, the two by him watching his arrest with an avid curiosity. The gendarme at the gate, equally alert, prepared to assist the international cops if necessary. A scrawny Martian mooching

past on some errand of his own, watching with idle yellow eyes that held the same loathing for all humans. Not a chance, not a prayer.

"What is the charge?" he asked tonelessly.

"Suspicion of treason to the Federation. Now come along." The man frisked him expertly, removing the gun but leaving the energy globe. Either he didn't know what it was, or he knew it was inactive and harmless. In no case could Fredison pull a comparable bluff.

"Look, this is some mistake," he insisted wildly. "I haven't done a thing. I'm here to see Astier—you know, *the* Astier, the nucleonics man. I demand a chance to call him up."

"You'll get it at headquarters, Maybe." The detective shoved him ahead. The other closed in, wary-eyed. Jones followed weakly, throwing Fredison a nastily triumphant look.

They got into the car, Fredison between the two plainclothesmen, Jones in front beside the impassive driver. The car's electric engine hummed and it slid smoothly away into the traffic. They turned toward the city, on the outskirts of which the field lay.

"Good Lord, how did you even know I was coming here?" babbled Fredison. "I didn't know myself till—"

"We got our orders. Now shut up."

Fredison lapsed, cursing himself with a new fury. Of course, of course! It was obvious from the very phrasing of the question. The Unionist bosses didn't trust their underlings any farther than they had to, and each plane must carry a magnetronic signal. It could be traced anywhere, around the world, by a man sitting in a room and watching a meter reading. Once they had known he was headed for Paris it had been simple to issue a few orders, have him picked up when he landed—with the full cooperation of the local authorities.

But that meant that his guess about the government was right. If Clinton, Minister of Security, had given those orders, then Clinton's power was such that appeal to anyone in the government for help would be worse than useless. There would be political pressure, thinly veiled threats of assassination, bribery, every rotten influence

in the Unionist armory brought to bear to hold Fredison.

Even the Premier, staunch old Mikkelsen, might have to yield, one way or another. At that, Mikkelsen might decide that the best bet for the peace and security of Earth would be to have Fredison and his dangerous knowledge killed and the energy globe dissolved.

It was chilling in its immensity and loneliness. In all the world there was no place to hide, they would hunt him down wherever he fled for he carried the rule of Earth in his hands and brain. Not, he thought desolately, that he would get any chance to flee. He was bound for some anonymous house at this moment, and after that would come the beatings and drugs.

He looked out the windows. They had left the main boulevards with their thronging traffic and were into narrower, emptier streets—not bound for official Security headquarters! The car whispered past unending blocks of crowded, lightless tenements, thick with shadow. Here and there would be another vehicle, a truck or an auto murmuring by. Once in a while a late pedestrian, or a lighted window gleaming farther away than the remotest star.

It was an evil section, somewhere in the neighborhood of Montparnasse he judged, with the Seine flowing black and quiet through the restless night. It was one of the slum sections, hastily rebuilt after the last atomic blitz and never improved subsequently, a place for murder and torture.

He thought wearily, without hope: *If I can somehow trick them, pretend cooperation, get a chance to activate the sphere . . . I'd take the whole city with me but it might be worth it. It might be worth it.*

THE other car slipped from an alley with a sudden roar of speed. The plainclothes driver cursed in German and yanked his wheel hard over. Tires squealed and smoked as the strange car swung the same way. They met in a shattering crash, hood to hood.

Fredison was hurled against the front seat. Even as he toppled, the flaming resolution was in him. He reached over the gasping body of one of the detectives and opened the door. His free fist caught the man under the jaw with a smack that jolted

back into his own muscles. Wildly scrambling he got out, rolled over on the pavement, and began running.

"Halt! Halt!"

A gun cracked behind him. Casting a backward glance, he saw that the strange car was disgorging passengers with weapons in their hands. A human, a woman with long hair tossing wildly around her shoulders, and a crew of Martians.

Martians!

Another bullet whanged past his ear. He rounded the block and went clattering up the street, running, running.

The energy globe bobbed in his tunic pocket, dense and heavy, its mass threatening to rip the fabric. It would swing out and then hit back against his hip with bruising force. Breath sobbing in raw lungs, he heard the mounting thunder of his overtaxed heart loud in his ears.

Another turn, and another. . . He'd lose them yet. Let them fight it out there in the street, Martians and Unionists, let the two murderous gangs wipe each other off the earth. He meant to get away.

He slowed to a rapid jog. It was quiet here, so quiet, no one else stirred in the long shadowy street, no light showed in the many-eyed windows of the blank dreary walls hemming him in. The street lamps glared down the length of the street, far apart, one-eyed skeletal giants with the night creeping between them. He was alone and hunted.

Far behind him, infinitely far it seemed, he heard the wail of sirens. The gendarmes would be on their way to the gunfight. But it wouldn't be any help to him, they couldn't save him. He stepped up his pace a little, the breath whistling through his nostrils.

A lighted window shone ahead, an upstairs window with a man leaning in it looking out into the night. He was smoking a cigar, a dull red glow waxing and waning against the shadow which was his face. He followed Fredison with eyes that—observed?

Farther along the way there was a little girl. She was perhaps ten years old and she was skipping rope by herself under a street lamp. He passed her, and her eyes were on him too, remembering the hurried figure in the polar clothes. And what was she doing, out by herself in the deepest

hour of the night? Was she one of their watchers.

He went on, and the darkness and loneliness swallowed her again.

Where to go? They'd be watching Astier's, they'd pick him up the minute he came near. He didn't know anyone else in Paris. His money, what he had, was hardly enough to buy a hotel room, and his clothes and stubbled beard marked him as with a brand. Where to go? Where to hide. What to do?

A dank breath blew from the night ahead of him. The Seine. He must be coming to a bridge, then. He slowed to a leg-trembling walk.

The bridge was narrow, as dingy and empty as the street. Fredison went out to its middle and halted. Leaning on the low guardrail he looked down to the tunnel of darkness which was the river.

Why not? he thought, and there was little emotion in him. He was too exhausted.

Why not, indeed? What else to do, in all the threatening universe? He had escaped by some fantastic freak, some providential collision between Security and Martian nationalists. That sort of luck didn't come twice, and he couldn't hope to remain at large very long. They said death by drowning was easy. All you had to do was open your mouth. And once dead he was forever safe from them. The small dense globe would sink deep, lie far down in mud and sand, and it did not respond to detectors. They would have little chance of finding it even if they thought that the object alone could tell them anything about its manufacture.

He sighed with the weariness of it and the lapping murmur of the river took up the little sound and smothered it in darkness. So that was all there was to it. You jumped over the parapet and kept your mouth open, and then goodbye sun and moon and stars and laughter of girls, goodbye Lars Fredison. You wasted Raihala's patient lifetime because you couldn't trust anyone. Not anyone in the whole immense loneliness of the universe.

He looked up and down the street on either side of the river. It was a cavern of blackness spotted with the glare of the lamps. It was an echoing aloneness, dead and silent above the muttering river. Best

to jump now, before his resolution weakened, before anyone came along. That man who had leaned in the window and watched him pass. . .

He threw one leg over the parapet.

"No."

THE croak came out of the night with a shattering impact. He whirled about, gasping.

The Martian seemed to have risen out of darkness, out of nowhere. He stood on the opposite side of the bridge, limned against the dark by a bar of light from some lamp, and there was a needle gun in his hand.

"If you try to jump," he said, "I will have to paralyze you and that would be awkward. You have already cost two Martian lives tonight. Please be a little more cooperative."

"Cost—I—" It was no use. The shock to his wire-taut nerves had completely unmanned him. He stood shaking and staring.

"We knew, from various sources of ours, that you were bound here and due to be arrested," said the Martian conversationally. "We had our agents here and there on the field—perhaps you noticed one? He was out of normal hearing range but our race has better ears than yours in this thick atmosphere. So we assembled our available forces and trailed the police car and attacked it at the right moment. Our notion was simply to capture you, but you eluded us, so we disposed of the Earth-agents—that cost us our losses—and then set out after you. It seemed quite likely that you would try to commit suicide so we sent a man to wait for you under each of the nearest bridges. Shortrange wrist radio, you know; I was only a few blocks away from here—I live there—when they called me and told me to await you."

Fredison shook his head. His tongue was thick and dry. "What is it now?" he whispered. "What do you want of me?"

"I think you know," said the Martian coldly.

Fredison tried to gather himself, tried to gauge the distance. One leap. . . The owlie was slow in Earth's heavy gravity. . . But not that slow. It would be no use to get himself anesthetized.

He looked his captor up and down. Typical Martian, you couldn't tell one from

another though he supposed that all humans looked alike to them. Not much over four feet tall, skinny, covered only by his gray feathers. He had clawed bird-like feet, bony four-fingered hands, round owl-face with feather-tuft ears and hooked beak, great slit-pupilled eyes with an unwinking, unhuman stare. The Martian's English was good, it came out with the guttural accent of his people and he did indescribable things to labial sounds—but good and clear, perfectly clear in its simplicity and deadliness.

"I have already called them of course," he said. "Another car has picked them up and is on its way now." He nodded. "Yes, here it comes."

Fredison could not hear the whisper of engine and tires until the sleek black vehicle had rounded a corner and pulled up on the bridge. Two Martians with pistols in hand got out of the rear seat and gestured him curtly to enter. He obeyed, his spirit sagging with defeat, and one of the owlies got in on either side of him. His first captor got into the front with another Martian and the human driver. A door slammed softly shut and the car got under way again.

The driver was the woman who had been in the gang fight, Fredison saw. He'd know that shining ice-blond hair anywhere in the Solar System. She didn't turn around. The Martians in front were watching him too with their heads swiveled uncannily about, but she drove with a slowly mounting speed and an unswerving purposefulness.

Fredison sighed and relaxed. Out of the frying pan into the furnace? Even the Unionists might be preferable to Martian rebels. But he couldn't do anything for the time being. He might as well rest. It had been a good try he'd made, a hell of a good try. His chance might come again.

"Where are we going?" he asked dully.

The woman's voice was young, low, with a musical accent that he couldn't place haunting its English. "To Mars, of course."

FREDISON woke with a start at the elbow in his ribs. The Martian voice seemed to come from very far away: "We are here. Step out now."

He shook his head, groping back to reality. After the long ride from the Ant-

arctic, hunger and exhaustion had lulled him to sleep with the monotonous purring of the car. He climbed stiffly out and looked around him.

They were somewhere south of Paris, in the country on the banks of the Seine, and it was close to dawn. The eastern sky was paling, light glimmered on the broad surface of the river, birds twittered drowsily from darkling trees. A cool breath of wind, wet with dew, kissed his face. Before them, hugging the shore, was a house, a French peasant's cottage like any of a million in the land, and a man in a grimy smock stood outside it. He had a disc-rifle in one hand.

The four Martians moved heavily. Earth dragged at them, the dampness tormented their sinuses, the oxygen-rich atmosphere was like fire in their lungs. But the phosphorescent eyes glowed unwinkingly and their weapons were held ready.

Fredison turned to the woman. She was tall, young and slender and lithe, she wore the slacks and open-collared blouse of any Europo-American girl dressed for some informal occasion.

Very informal! he thought wryly, noting the pistol holstered at her waist and the small competent hand resting on its butt. In the thin pale dawn-light, her face was still half a mystery, but he saw that it was high of cheekbone and square of jaw, strong beautiful structure under the clear pale skin. Her eyes were big, night-black, brilliant between long sooty lashes, an elfin hint of obliquity under brows that had the lovely curve of a gull's wing. And what was she doing with these creatures that hated all humanity?

The peasant spoke in rapid-fire French and the girl responded as easily. Fredison couldn't catch more than half a dozen words—something about a spaceship. They went into the house.

Clean, ordinary, the home of any well-to-do peasant, with a plump middle-aged housewife setting breakfast out. Fredison realized anew how hungry he was. He didn't bother to speak until he had had two servings.

Then he looked up, to catch a hint of amusement in the girl's eyes. An early sunbeam slanted through the window and ran down her hair. "Have you a cigaret?" he asked.

"Certainly." She held out a pack and he lit her own with his.

"Life isn't so bad now, is it?" she asked.

"Could be worse," admitted Fredison. "Right now."

"Oh, you don't have—much—to fear from us. Not if you behave yourself. You do owe us your life, you know. Your sanity, at the very least." She shivered. "I've seen them come out of Clinton's cells."

A Martian stuck his head in the kitchen door and hooted a few syllables. The girl replied in the same language. She couldn't manage some of the sounds, they came more softly from her throat than from the owl's beak, but she spoke swiftly and easily.

"Quite the linguist, aren't you?" said Fredison.

"It's my business." She stood up. "Come on, we have to get out of here."

He glanced around him, wondering what the chances were of making a break for it, of getting to the car. The gun clanked free of her belt. "Don't try it," she said coldly.

With enormous casualness he nodded. One hand was in his tunic pocket, closed on the energy sphere. He took it out, slowly, letting the fist swing loose at his side. If he could ditch it somewhere, toss it among the reeds, then they wouldn't have it, and not all the hellishness they could inflict on him would make him create another.

A hard hand slipped into his. The Martian took the sphere away. A faint smile played over the girl's wide firm mouth. They went out behind the house and down toward the river.

The spaceship had been rolled from a shed. It was small, one of the superfast General Atomic jobs with room for about six passengers on a short voyage, and in that ship a voyage to Mars would be short. To the casual eye it could hardly be told from an ordinary large rocketplane. The neighbors would have little to gossip about, save that Pierre or Jacques or whoever he was had entertained some wealthy tourists who kept a Martian entourage and went back home after awhile.

Good stunt. Bold, too, thus to maintain a base under the very nose of the enemy. But where in all the planetary hells had they gotten that kind of money and organization? He had thought of Martians as primitives but they seemed not so simple now.

HE WENT through the narrow airlock, down a short passageway of gleaming metal, to the acceleration hammock which a Martian pointed out to him. Wordlessly, he let them strap him in and took the hypo of anti-drug — anti-acceleration, anti-vertigo, anti everything which had made early space travel such an endurance contest. Men flew swiftly and easily between the stars these days, if they had the money to pay for the best, but were their errands any the better for that?

Two of the other Martians strapped in close to him. The third went aft toward the engines, the fourth forward with the girl. Presently the engines rumbled, a thunder voice shaking the ship, shaking their bones and muscles and brains, blurring vision with its bass command. Fredison tried to relax.

Acceleration slammed him back, a giant's hand ramming into his belly, grabbing him by the throat and reaching down to yank at his heart. The roar and boom of the engines resounded in his head, *crash, bang, whooom*. He lay and waited for what seemed a very long time.

Slowly, the acceleration dropped until they were running at about one gee. If they kept that up, he estimated, then with Mars' present position they should get there in some three days. There wouldn't be much to do enroute, such a vessel all but ran itself. So now they could have plenty of time to work over their prisoner.

The girl came back and stood looking down at him. There was an odd, indefinable expression on her face, something at once grim and sorrowful, a touch of the reaching loneliness which had entered Fredison's heart.

She said at last in the low sweet voice he liked to hear, "Listen Fredison. You are our captive, and we are a determined group. But we aren't brutes. I want you to understand that. We don't torture and we don't kill except when we must."

He forced himself to coldness. "I've heard differently."

"Oh, you've been fed the same lies that all Earth is gorged with, the stories of Martian fiendishness, the myth that they want only to wipe out all our species." The disgust in her tones became something gentler. "Is my presence here evidence for

that? Could the Martians have accomplished all they have done without help from plenty of Earthlings?" Earnestly, "And we aren't turncoats, Fredison. We have our rewards, yes, but we are working for the good of our own race as well as that of all intelligent life."

"We're going to Kreega's lair in the Syrtis country, and there you can see for yourself. But I hope we can persuade you a little even before we arrive. Persuade you to help us."

"That'll take a hell of a lot of persuading."

"At least we can talk. You aren't among morons and fanatics now. We can talk like intelligent beings. But I'd rather not keep you tied up or under guard all the time. If you'll give your parole to behave on the voyage you may go free."

"How do you know I'd keep my word?" he challenged. "This is a hell of a big cause."

She shrugged. "I don't. But all you could do is make trouble. You could use your Terrestrial strength to some advantage in this acceleration, yes. But you couldn't take anyone by surprise. Even a sleeping Martian has keener senses than you do, and reacts quicker. We might have to shoot you, and naturally we'd rather avoid the necessity."

Fredison thought for a minute. "All right," he said. "I promise." And, his mind added, I'll keep the promise unless a really good chance appears.

Her sudden smile was warm and dazzling. "Good! Thank you! You won't regret it." She began unbuckling him. "And my name is Phyllia Dale."

"Glad to know you." He shook hands. Her grip was as firm and frank as a man's, but the fingers were cool and slender within his. A beautiful woman could go a long ways toward reconciling you to anything. "Miss Dale, I hope?"

She nodded impersonally. "You'll want to wash up," she said. "The bathroom is down there. Come back to the bridge afterward and we can talk."

He found hot water and a razor in the tiny cubicle. There was no shower but he cleaned with a sponge. A wordless Martian handed him a fresh suit of clothes—the one-piece woolen garment which could serve as underclothing for a spacesuit should that

need arise—and followed him up to the bridge.

It was near the bows, a cramped little room with two pilot chairs before the flashing instrument panel and a Martian in each. The girl stood by the door, nodded to the Earthman, and said, "This is Kruun, here with you. Dakka is down with the engines. And here are the brothers Iggidan and Hraestoh."

Fredison smiled. "I'll settle for Ike and Mike," he said. "How the devil do you even pronounce those names, let alone remember them?"

"I am a Martian too," she answered gravely.

"Hm?"

"I was born and raised there."

HRAESTOH—Mike—turned around and gabbled harshly at her. She took a long step over to him and stood frowning at the radarscope.

"What's the trouble?" asked Fredison.

"Another ship—somewhere behind us—see." She pointed to the pip, flickering and dancing on the impersonal scope face. "Roughly a parallel course, too."

Fredison looked uneasily around him, as if he could pierce the metal walls and a hundred thousand miles of vacuum. "Coincidence," he suggested.

"I hope so," she said bleakly. "But this isn't any regular flight, I'm sure of that, and private ships aren't very common. . ."

Are they hunting again?

It was suddenly very quiet on the bridge. The muffled roar of the rockets was a steady drone up here, an underlying vibration which hardly counted as sound, lost and smothered in the reaching stillness of space. The forward port was now "up" when the ship was accelerating, a round hole in the wall yawning with an immense darkness, black and cold and spattered with a million cruel stars. He couldn't see Earth but the Moon's great crescent was a scarred brilliance to one side. Hugeness and quietness and the vast lonely night between the worlds—

He shivered.

"We'll just have to see what develops," she said. Her voice was flat.

Kruun went over to a cabinet and took out the energy globe. Silently, he handed

it back to Fredison. The man stood holding it, looking down at the cold white shimmer of the thing. "It ought to be destroyed," he said. "I thought the world was ready for it but I was wrong."

"You can dissolve it, then?" asked Phyllia Dale.

"Oh, yes, quite easily. A simple keying circuit, giving it weak electrical pulses of the right frequency to build up resonance, and out come four-and-a-half-times ten to the twenty fourth ergs—enough energy to boil two or three hundred tons of water, to turn several square miles of land into molten slag." Fredison's teeth flashed in a humorous grin. "But I won't do it for you."

"You may change your mind," she murmured.

"It isn't right," he said, a little wildly. "I didn't ask for the job. Raihala only wanted to liberate man forever from his energy needs and I was only his helper on a worthwhile project. I didn't ask to flee through the Solar System with Doomsday in my hands."

"You're stuck with it now." Her answer was bitter. "You and every other scientist who ever built anything men could use to create hell. You gave man atomic energy to flatten his cities, germ cultures to wipe out his children, spaceships to carry the same horror out to the great clean spaces of the other worlds. Why don't you use that big scientific brain to undo some of the harm?"

"I suppose you'd like to be back in the Middle Ages, sitting in a mud hut and kowtowing to your feudal overlord and waiting for the Black Plague to catch up with you," he snapped. "It's society that uses these things well or badly, the society of which the scientist is only one small part. And I don't think spaceships and atomic bombs would seem so horrible if Mars had them and Earth didn't."

"I told you I wasn't against Earth," she replied coldly.

"I'll make your keying circuit," he offered. "I'll dissolve the globe and the ship and all of us, and then neither side will have this thing."

"No."

"But there's no one who's fit to use it!" he said. "Nobody on Earth can be trusted neither to misuse it nor to let it fall into

the hands of those who would. And I don't think the Martians are any better."

"Maybe not," she said, "but whose fault is that? They were a gentle race before Earthmen came. They lived in their deserts in a symbiosis with the wild life such as men will never comprehend. They wished harm to no one in the universe. And then the Earthmen came, and enslaved them and hunted them for sport and all but wiped out their race."

"That much is past. There hasn't been Martian or Venusian slavery for fifty years now. It's as much of a crime to kill one of them as to kill a human."

"Try and get a conviction on Mars if a human kills a native. But if it's the other way around, then off to the gas chamber."

"Things aren't what they should be, no. But they're improving. Mars has friends on Earth, the Liberal party is pledged to improve their lot and eventually to get them full citizenship. Kreega and his nationalist rebels are only injuring the Martian cause."

"Mars has learned. It won't get freedom and equality till it's strong enough to stand up and demand it. Meanwhile, the Unionists and their allies are working to restore the old enslavement, spreading their propaganda, provoking incidents, enforcing the ridiculous segregation laws to the letter. Who do you think is handing out those atrocity stories about the rebels? The Unionists, to create an issue, and the big space-exploitation companies, who want their cheap slave labor back. I tell you, it's all a pack of lies! The Martians haven't attacked a human settlement since the last pacification two or three generations ago. They kill the illegal slave raiders, the army detachments sent against them, the brutal mine and planation operators, the yelping politicians. . . They leave it to Earthlings to kill the babies and the aged."

Her blazing tones died away and she went back to look at the radarscope.

"Falling behind," she murmured, "but that could be only an effect of different orbits. Well, Kreega has been hounded from his strongholds before this. The important thing is not to be captured."

Fredison thought of her in a Unionist torture cell and felt a coldness within him.

2—PLANET—May

She turned back to him with more friendliness. "I'm not blaming you, Dr. Fredison . . ."

"Lars," he said. "It looks as if we'll be pretty closely associated for awhile."

She smiled with a curious warmth. "All right, Lars. I'd like to pry you loose from that martyr complex and make you do something constructive with this power of yours."

"I haven't the least desire to be a martyr if it can be avoided," he said. "But show me how."

She touched the sphere with a half frightened awe. "All that in there, like a little sun waiting to shine," she whispered. "How did you do it? How could anyone dare?"

"Raihala worked most of a lifetime on it or on related problems," he admitted. "It's his baby, really. And honest, Phyllia, I'd like to bring the brat up right."

"How does it work?"

"You don't expect me to tell you that."

"Maybe not—now. But can't you give me a general idea? The rumors said it was radiant energy enclosed in a spacewarp."

"Mmm, well, that's a clumsy way of putting it. Matter is energy, you know, you might call it solid energy since it's formed into discrete subatomic particles. That's ignoring the complications introduced by wave mechanics, of course, even if those are the very crux of this business. Then if you think of ordinary radiation as being like a—gas, shall we say?—then this is a liquid state of energy. It stays in one place, like an electron or proton, but it's one continuous blob. The equations of its continuity involve certain distortions of the space-time coordinates, yes. Raihala's generator creates a field which is such that any radiant-energy quanta impinging on it remain there. You might think of this globe as being a sponge soaked full of energy, only of course the energy itself is the sponge too. It's quite stable now, in fact impervious to any ordinary force—infinite reflectivity, infinite hardness, infinite resistivity, and so on. But the keying circuit upsets the stability, and then at any disturbance the whole thing breaks up. It doesn't break up at once, but gradually, into chunks and blobs which—well—soak into neighboring matter and become kinetic energy of its atoms. And that's all I'm going to tell you."

"That's enough, for now," said the Mar-

tian named Iggidan, and Fredison realized with a shock that he must have been the one who captured him on the bridge. "I can see the advantages, of course. It is pure energy in its most concentrated form. A little of this, fed into a turbine or a rocket's reaction chambers, would drive the machine with greater power than we have yet achieved, and without radioactivity—therefore none of this heavy, clumsy shielding and remote controlling we have to use now. It would do everything any energy source has ever done and more, neatly and efficiently. Or it could be the most powerful bomb ever created. You could make a big enough energy globe to blow up a planet."

Fredison blinked. He was having trouble overcoming the ingrained notion that all Martians were ignorant barbarians with no natural technical aptitude.

Slowly he said in reply, "The really wonderful thing about it, to Raihala's mind, was that any energy source would do. Sunlight, for instance, or water power—no matter how dilute the source, you could simply let it accumulate until you had enough energy in one place to do whatever you wanted. No more trouble with dwindling fuel reserves—unlimited energy, energy to reclaim whole planets and perhaps to go out to the stars." He sighed. "And the old man was right, as far as he went. But he didn't go far enough."

"I think he did," said Phyllia. "If we use it right."

Iggidan's amber eyes went back to the radarscope. "If we live to use it right," he said.

IV

MARS.

A world of grimness and desolation, a world grown old before its time, seas drying and soil shriveling until it lay thin and wrinkled on the iron bones of the planet, a sweep of deserts and wind-scoured ocherous hills out to the horizon, a few human settlements huddled beneath dusty domes under a scornful heaven.

It was not a world for men, it had never been and it could never be. Humans had come here in the early days looking for fissionables, high-grade ores, military bases, slaves. They had stayed to keep these things

streaming out toward Earth and man's other possessions, to trade with the natives, and to grow certain plants whose secretions were a valuable base for organic syntheses.

In time there came to be humans who were born and lived and died and were buried on Mars without ever seeing Earth. But it was still not man's world, and as he saw the deserts rushing away beneath the spaceship Fredison thought that Kreega's rebellion was but an expression of something older and deeper, some great basic revolt of primitive strangeness against the invaders.

For all that, he had to admit that it was, in certain aspects, as complex and sophisticated an uprising as history had ever seen. Thirty or forty Earth-years ago there had been nothing, a few neolithic savages skulking in the hills, living the solitary life of their kind, at sullen truce with the conquerors.

It was Kreega who had first obtained a few workable Earth weapons and used them to arm a band that raided for more. It was Kreega who had started hidden manufacturies going, one part made in a cave in Thyle, another section in the subarctic marshes, a third in the equatorial forests. It was Kreega's generalship which had beaten off attack after attack, guerrilla fighting, hit-and-run assaults, attrition, until he held great sections where humans didn't come any more.

Then there had been the linkage, through an occasional sympathetic trader or explorer, with humans on Earth who for one reason or another were not averse to Martian independence. There had been mining, furtrading, jewel-hunting, the Martians selling them through their few human friends so that their organization's funds swelled.

Martians on Earth, as workers or visitors or personal attendants, kept up contact with their Terrestrial fellows, who slowly created their own network of sympathizers and hirelings—gunmen, spacemen, on up to scientists and men in government. There were even Martian spies in the Unionist Party.

"Oh, yes, we know pretty well what is going on," said Krunn. "We can often act to forestall our enemies, such as in your own case."

"But why do they do it?" asked Fredison.

"The humans, I mean. What motive have they?"

"Some for gain, of course. We can pay well. Others for—oh, a variety of reasons. Adventure, the help we can give against their own opponents, a feeling that the friendship of Mars is worth having, a conviction that Martian independence is historically inevitable and the sooner and easier it is obtained the easier Earth will have it in the future. Many are Panbiotists, you know, the philosophy that all life is one and that evil done to any living and worthy creature is evil done to all. And some humans are really Martians, too."

"Eh? Disguised? Impossible!"

"No, I mean they have grown up there, perhaps their families have been there for generations. The landscape has entered them. They have known Martian natives intimately, had Martian nurses and playmates and comrades, absorbed as much of the Martian spirit as a human can. To them Earth is another world, an alien with no more right to impose its pattern on Mars than we would have a right to come to Earth and thin its atmosphere and dry up its seas and curse you people because you have hair instead of feathers and make you live in the hills and the caves—simply because we happen to prefer that kind of life.

"Such as Phyllia Dale, for instance. Her parents were colonials themselves, traders who befriended us. She has known more Martians more years of her life than humans. She has only been on Earth twice in her life. Kreega was like a father to her after her parents' death. Oh, yes, she is a Martian."

"I don't understand," muttered Fredison. And he avoided personal talk with the girl for the rest of the trip.

The other ship, invisible among the thronging stars, fell out of radar range, but the Martians still talked worriedly among themselves. Fredison felt cut off and sulked in his hammock.

And so they came to Mars, dropped out of the night and the cold and the long dark miles and flamed over the face of the planet. Fredison saw Phyllia go by with a straining eagerness in her eyes and asked sardonically: "Are you that happy to be home?"

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh, yes!"

"Lord!" He thought of the raw desolation hurtling below them, hills and plains and iron valleys ringing with the rocket thunder, and grimaced. "Why'd you come to Earth at all?"

"We needed contacts—messages to carry, people to see, things which a Martian couldn't do without being too conspicuous. Earth is a fair world, yes, Lars, but this is home."

She sighed happily.

HE SHOOK his head. It wasn't right. It wasn't right or normal. She was young and beautiful and full of life, she should have been on Earth, going to dances, laughing with a dozen men around her, lying on a broad yellow beach with the clean salt wind of Earth's oceans blowing her hair. And instead she longed to be back to a world of rocks and gullies and scrubby, dusty thorn-bushes, a land of flitting gray things with owl eyes where she couldn't even walk outdoors without an airsuit. Heavenly orbits, she probably took part in their ceremonies!

Meanwhile, though, there was his own problem. Somehow he had to talk a bunch of bitter-hearted rebels into letting him go free with his secret. Mars wasn't a bad hideout for the time being. He could drift into any of the brawling mine towns under an alias and work at assaying or something of the sort but he wasn't going to hand Kreega the means of blowing up all Earth.

They came down somewhere in the chartless interior of Syrtis, landing with a boom and a thud after which there was ringing silence. This was the secret rebel fortress, thought Fredison, this was the place whose location would be worth a cool million dollars to some Unionist-minded officer of the Mars Patrol, and what was he going to do now?

He climbed into an airsuit, a bulky thing of tough insulated fabric, with plastic helmet and heavy boots. The heating coils and the airpump which compressed the local atmosphere to a density Earthlings could breathe ran off a powerbeam. Kreega must have an atomic generator somewhere hereabouts. And there was an emergency powerpack which would be good for a few hours. It would have been intolerably heavy on Earth, but even wearing it he was

lighter here than he had been at home.

He saw Phyllia's ivory-pale cheeks flushed, she bounded laughing ahead of him and out the airlock. The Martians followed happily, filling their lungs with the thin parched air of their planet, ruffling their feathers in the harsh cold wind of home.

There were other natives clustered around the ship, perhaps fifty of them with a few young scampering between their long bony legs. They wore little but pouched belts but nearly all carried disc-guns. A silent crowd, greeting the newcomers with grave croaks and fleeting touches, parted a noiseless way for the two humans. Fredison felt the chill golden eyes following him, watching every step, and his spine crawled. Several natives began rolling the ship away toward some hiding place.

One of the group stepped forward and took Phyllia's gloved hands in his own clawlike fingers. He was old, old and lean, with his feathers frost-gray and his gait stooped. But the head was held arrogantly erect, the eyes blazed, it was less the face of an owl than of a hawk. Across one shoulder hung a strange curved trumpet, old and handsome, an insignia of rank.

Their voices hooted and croaked, his and the girl's, harsh unhuman sounds with a strange tenderness. "Welcome home, welcome home!"

Phyllia turned and beckoned to Fredison. Her amplified voice, muffled by the thinness of the air, seemed no louder than normal, "Lars, this is Kreega."

The man stood looking at the native for a long moment. So this was Kreega, the great enemy of Earth, the fabulous and terrible figure with whom mothers frightened their children to bed even far back on the green planet of humankind.

Even among his own long-lived species Kreega was ancient, and all his days had gone to the unrelenting war. He had fought pitilessly, brilliantly. As cold and savage as his own deserts, he had welded his scattered and broken race into a nation of warriors, and still there was strength and will left in him. Still he could fight and think. Fredison wondered what to do or say.

"I am glad to know you, sir," said the Martian. His English was as harsh and stiff as himself. "I trust we shall find much in common."

"That I doubt," said Fredison bluntly. But in spite of himself, in spite of the fact that he was here against his will and these were his enemies and captors, he felt out of place—awkward, loud, an alien in the great quiet lands of Mars. "However, I would welcome a chance to discuss matters with you."

"You will have many," said Kreega imperturbably. "But let me give you some advice, sir. You may move freely about, within limits, and act as a guest. However, your whereabouts will always be known to some of us and there will be no chance for mischief. Should the need arise it would be very simple to turn off the power to your aircuit. Please conduct yourself accordingly. Meanwhile, Miss Dale will serve as your guide. Try to make yourself as comfortable as possible."

HE BOWED stiffly and walked off. Phyllia smiled and came up close to Fredison. "You mustn't mind him," she said. "He's an old darling, really."

"I suppose so," said Fredison dryly.

"Why don't we look around a bit? This is the closest thing to a city Mars has had for I don't know how many thousand years. It's worth seeing."

Fredison paced at her side. "They live alone ordinarily, don't they?" he asked.

"More or less, with the big ceremonial assemblies twice a Mars-year, the mating times. They had a civilization of towns and agriculture long ago but they gave that up in favor of something better, a symbiosis with the wild life which freed them from merely physical needs, since their tastes are very simple, and let them move ahead in their own ways. I have only the faintest idea what those ways are, I can't really comprehend all that they do just as they can't grasp many concepts which are elementary to an Earthling. But it was their own life and a good one."

"I don't see how you could have any kind of civilization without communication."

"Oh, but they had that, through the symbiosis. The desert—whispers." She spread her hands. "No, I can't describe it. I've only felt the very outermost fringes of it."

"My Martian," he smiled, with a certain

underlying sadness. "My beautiful little Martian."

"What?" She looked at him, surprised, not understanding flirtation, and the pity was stronger in his heart. Poor kid, poor lovely kid, it wasn't right. . .

"This is Kreega's main rallying point in Syrtis," she went on, trying to cover her confusion. "There is a permanent garrison, an arsenal, a small factory, but it can all be moved out in a hurry if that should ever be necessary."

They walked slowly around the place, saying little, avoiding each other's eyes. It was strong, all right, thought the man, though he wondered what chance it would have against a full-dress attack. It was built atop a mesa rising over the rugged hills of Syrtis, a place scored and seamed with ancient canyons and dry riverbeds, caves and crags and hidden fastnesses. Here and there the crumbling square-built ruins of towers and walls older than human history rose out of rock and bush, their hard outlines blurred by the wind till they were another part of the landscape.

On the west side of the mesa a steep rubble slope dropped half a mile to the lower hills. Atop it, behind a three-foot parapet, was a wide dusty terrace beyond which rose the low rambling walls of one of the old buildings. A solitary guard stood on the cliff edge some distance off, leaning on his disc-gun and staring into the westering sun. Otherwise no one was in sight. The two humans paused and stood looking over the Martian hills.

It was a grim and bitter landscape, tawny rust-streaked rock fantastically jumbled into soaring crags and raw bluffs and steep-walled ravines, hard splashes of mineral color, red and blue and ocher and umber, against the naked stone. Here and there were clumps of brush and low twisted trees, thorny and dusty and dull gray-green of hue.

The shadows were long in the thin chill light of the shrunken sun, sliding edges of darkness against which the crags loomed sharp and savage. Sand blew with a dry whisper between bushes and rocks, whirled and hissed on the faint mordant wind and gnawed at the crumbling stone. Once Fredison saw something slink gauntly out of a cave, a lean feathered thing like a wolf

snuffling out after food, and another time a huge-winged bird flapped its slow way overhead—otherwise only stillness and death and the rustling sand. Above him the sky was a deep blue-black with a tinge of green, a high unearthly heaven where stars twinkled faintly even in the daytime.

Mars.

The girl sighed beside him and he saw her looking at the land as if it were a holy vision. "Isn't it beautiful?" she whispered. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"That? Phyllia, that's the damndest creepy desert I ever saw in my life. You can call that naked hacked-up hagridden scenery beautiful?"

"But it is," she cried, and there was a strange appeal in the lustrous dark eyes that turned to him. "Can't you see it? Can't you see the bigness and the loneliness and the cleanness of it? Out here you can be alone with God and with the life which is Mars. You can belong and still be yourself—Oh, Lars, it's home!"

He shook his head, wonderingly. "Let's go inside," he said.

SHE sighed, and there was a blurring in her eyes. She turned her face away and led him into the building.

It was long, full of echoing stone halls and bare stone cells. It could have been some austere Syrian monastery in old days on Earth. Now and again a Martian padded by, another shadow in the great dim length of the corridors, and Fredison's amplifying earphones caught the remote twanging of music. Not human music—this went up and down an eerie scale such as man had never known. It was charged with the weird windy desolation outside and the man's nerves recoiled from it.

They came finally to a new steel door. "Airlock to my quarters," said Phyllia. "I hope you won't mind—the air in there is pretty thin and chilly by Earth standards. I'll give you the extra room."

"Thanks," he said, a little thickly. He wondered how to let her know tactfully that it might be putting too much of a strain on his self-control. Well, maybe that was Kreega's idea.

No—no, he didn't think Martian minds ran in such channels. It occurred to him again what gross and uncouth monsters

humans were by their standards. And nevertheless, they had treated him decently so far, and they could win honest and gentle Earthlings to their cause. They couldn't be the murderous fanatics of propaganda.

Not that they'd scruple to kill him, if it came to that.

The girl's rooms were furnished with a little more comfort than he had expected, though still not a great deal. There were rugs on the floors, a couple of delicately carved chairs and tables, some vases of quiet shimmering loveliness. Could the Martians do that?

There was an anachronistic kitchen—he thought of her alone here, cooking and eating and sleeping in loneliness, and the pity returned. A broad window overlooked the enormous landscape and he wondered at the mind which could find beauty and serenity in its raw wilderness.

"Are you here all the time?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she laughed. "I'm working or talking with the *Hrokkai*—the Martians—out roaming the deserts, traveling all over the planet seeing other natives and our human friends, doing a lot of our business with other men. I keep busy, Lars, and I have a lot of fun."

He shook his head, feeling the sadness close down more heavily. Perhaps the worst part of it was that she didn't imagine any need for pity, that she was actually happy here—or wasn't that good? What is proper and normal anyway? Would she really have been happier as an empty-lifed butterfly on Earth?

On one of the tables stood a stereograph of a middle-aged human couple. "Your parents?" he asked.

"Yes." Her voice dropped suddenly low. "They were killed by a bunch of human bandits. Owlie-lovers, they were called, but the men were only after their money."

"Oh, Phyllia . . ."

He had her in his arms, he never remembered how, and he was kissing her very gently and breathing the fragrance of her hair. She was stiff for a moment and then she sighed and leaned against him and her arms crept up around his neck.

"Lars, Lars . . ."

"Come away with me, Phyllia. Come away from here, this isn't right for you, you should have a home and children and—Oh,

darling, darling, come away with me."

"I can't, Lars, and you can't, we're caught up in this together and we can't ever run from it. But stay with me, Lars."

"I love you." He said it with a great dawning wonder. "Why, I'm in love with you!"

She laughed, softly, close against him.

The door groaned behind them. They drew apart, she was blushing firely and breathing hard, but their hands stayed locked together.

Kreega entered, coughing in the sudden thickness of the air. A couple of his followers were beside him, weapons in hand. Even as he watched them, Fredison felt the floor quiver under his feet and heard a muffled booming.

The Martian chief spoke, flat and hard as an iron blade, "They have come. They have found us out and now they are coming against us in force. Fredison, whose side are you on?"

V

"LORD, no—!"
"Kraagh-ixch aythorr—"

Even in that wild moment, Fredison noticed with a sudden desolation how the instinctive words which ripped from her were Martian.

"They are sending bombers over," said Kreega.

"But you said this place was secret!" exploded Fredison.

"It was," replied the Martian leader. "But the imperialists have their own spies, no doubt, and occasionally they capture one of us who has some real information and drug or torture it out of him."

The stone walls rumbled and shivered. Outside the window a fine veil of sand and dust drifted up against the darkening sky.

"Or that spaceship behind us," said the girl. Her voice came swiftly, suddenly taut and cool as if this were an old story. "They would have suspected we would leave Earth and could have mounted ships along our probable orbit. If one of them spotted us it could have followed till close enough to Mars, then it would have radioed Patrol headquarters to pick us up on radar and follow us in."

Brrrooom!

Kreega's chill yellow eyes swung to Fredison. "This is no time for idle talk," he snapped. "They are after you and the energy sphere. Will you activate it for us?"

"What good would it do?" he protested desperately. "I can't use it against bombers."

"At the very least, you and your knowledge can be destroyed," said the cold voice.

Fredison looked at Phyllia and met her dark tear-bright gaze. For a very long time they stood looking at each other and their hands drew apart as if the gulf between planets had opened before them.

"I can't fight the Mars Patrol," he whispered. "It was all right to fight Clinton's thugs but this is the government of Earth, the government I helped elect. Those aren't bandits up there, they're decent boys, humans like us, doing a job. I can't kill them."

"You just got through saying you couldn't fight bombers anyway," said Kreega dryly. With a vicious bite, "Decide now, Fredison, or we will shoot you down!"

The floor rocked under them and concussion roared against their eardrums. Fredison saw a jagged split opening in one wall and felt the thin outward rush of air. Phyllia had fallen to the floor. She crawled up, shaking her head dizzily so that the long fair hair swirled about her face. When she looked back at him he saw that there was blood on one cheek.

"Come on," he snarled. "I'll do it."

They tumbled into their airsuits, frantically as the atmosphere poured away from them. The Martians dropped their guns and helped, lacing, zipping, bolting down helmets and powerpacks. In moments the humans were armored.

They fled out into the corridors. The dust of broken stone whirled underfoot, misting the airhelmets until it was as if they ran through gray fog. Fredison saw Martians scurrying on their way to their posts for a futile gallantry of defense, leaping shadows in the trembling halls. The bomb-thunder crashed and roared about them.

They emerged from the rear of the building and dashed across an open courtyard. The last sunlight blazed on the metal flanks of the bombing rockets, wheeling and soaring high overhead, a dozen steely monsters raining murder down on the fortress. Great gouts of fire and dust foun-

tained heavenward, walls and towers sprang into a hail of stone, the ground shook underfoot. Fredison saw three Martian interceptors spurt flame and climb for the enemy.

INTO a farther building, along a hallway, down a stair hewn into rock ten thousand years before . . . Another metal door, blatant in its newness against the dying old Martian work, an airlock, into a long low-ceilinged room glittering with physical apparatus. Fredison stripped off his gauntlets and flung his helmet back even as he sped for the bench on which lay the energy globe.

Dakka and Hraestoh were standing by the bench. "What do you want, Dr. Fredison? Name it and we'll get it."

He rapped out the list: vacuum tubes, rheostats, variable condensers, resistors, and began fiddling with the oscilloscope already set up. "Have to get the frequencies just right," he muttered, "or the thing won't work."

His hands seemed to have a life of their own, plying tools, creating the circuit without conscious thought. Down here the bomb-concussion sounded faintly, a broken rumbling hardly to be sensed above the clamor of his heart. "Why aren't you fighting the bombers with more pursuit rockets?" he asked. "Those three I saw going up may get one or two and then they'll be shot down. You ought to have guided missiles, too."

"But we haven't," said Kreega wearily. "Those things don't suit our style of fighting, even if we could afford them. The rockets we just now sent are indeed going to their destruction but they may hold off the attack just a little, just long enough." He sagged into a chair and Fredison realized how old and tired he was.

"Those aren't atomic bombs," said Phyllia. She sat down on the arm of Kreega's chair and stroked his feathered head with tender fingers. "Tordenite, I think, strong stuff but not atomic."

"Certainly not," said Kreega. "They don't want radioactivity. They are simply reducing us now, softening us for their infantry and armor. The *Ares* must be somewhere nearby. It will discharge its forces when all our works here are flattened. Then they'll move in and kill as many of us as they can."

The bombs bellowed overhead. The thing

he was building grew under Fredison's hands.

A buzz came from the telescreen in one corner. "Call on the standard wavelength," said Kreega. "It must be the Earthlings." He got up and limped over to the instrument and flicked its receiver on.

The blurred image sharpened. Fredison saw a human face, a bald and double-chinned man with a ruthless forcefulness in the nose and jaw and pale eyes—Clinton. By the gods, Clinton himself, chief of Security!

"I want to speak to Kreega," he said. His voice was strong, reverberant with the arrogance of power.

"This is he." Against that bulking image the Martian seemed small and thin and frail, a futile gray ghost, a withered autumn leaf waiting to be whirled off by the winds of winter.

"Kreega," said Clinton, "I want Fredison alive. I know you have him and the Mars Patrol is coming in to get him. You may, of course, try to kill the man first or do something equally silly, so I am prepared to offer generous terms."

He paused expectantly. When Kreega said nothing, he went on, "In exchange for Fredison, amnesty for all native rebels and for such humans as you may designate, and a conference between your group and the government of Earth at which such grievances as you feel you may have can be adjusted. I am empowered by the Cabinet to make this offer or, if you refuse, to take whatever measures seem best to me. And I warn you those will be harsh measures."

"And how do I know you will abide by such terms?" asked the Martian scornfully.

"They will be broadcast over the entire planet and beamcast to Earth as soon as you agree. Your own agents, listening in here and on Earth, will be able to tell you that that is the case. Thereafter we could not back down without the government falling and a new election which would remove all of us from office. You know that much about Earth, at least."

"And what concessions could I expect?"

"We are prepared to offer Mars equal status with all other nations, representation in the Federation parliament, internal independence subject to the usual democratic guarantees, and economic assistance. All

you have striven for all your life, handed you on a silver platter in exchange for releasing this man you have kidnapped." A sly politician's look glittered in Clinton's ice-pale eyes. "If you turn down such an offer, Kreega, your own people will disown you."

The Martian looked back toward the two humans. His expression was unreadable.

"Come over here, Fredison," he said.

SLOWLY, the physicist rose and walked over into iconoscope range. He carried the energy globe in his hands, encased in the framework of the disruptor.

"So you are alive," said Clinton. "I'm glad of that. I hope you appreciate what trouble we've gone to rescue you."

"Rescue!" Fredison's laugh jarred the sudden stillness of the room. "You did your bloody damndest to capture me yourself, and you know it. What can I expect once I'm in your hands?"

"Honor, riches, all the usual rewards of great achievement. I can't see your work running loose this way, it's a mortal danger to all humankind and it's my job to protect the race. But now your power can be put to work doing something constructive."

"Such as helping a Unionist revolt?" said Fredison. "Oh, it's obvious what you're after, Clinton. Once you have me, you can afford to concede everything because in a few months you'll have the means to taking over the whole Solar System."

"You're impugning the loyalty of a legitimate party. And in any case I am not a Unionist, I ran as a Technicist and you ought to know it."

"I do. I also know, as everyone does who's not blind, that the Technicist Party is a Unionist dummy. They didn't run a man against you in your district, did they? You aren't suppressing their illegal private armies, are you?" Fredison laughed again, without mirth. "Oh, no, Clinton, you and your sort have been trading on the political innocence of the scientists for too long now. I read something besides technical journals, and I talk to more people than just my colleagues."

"Fredison, this is treason. You're going against your government—against your very race. All you can accomplish is your own death—for nothing. If you don't concede to

us now I'll declare martial law and the whole owlie race will be hunted down like the animals they are."

They had stopped bombing. A great and terrible hush had fallen and only the humming of the telescreen broke the stillness. Phyllia stood rigid beside Fredison, the hand that touched his was cold. Kreega was like a carven image in gray stone. The other Martians crouched tense on the floor—not a movement, not a whisper.

The man shook his head at last, blindly. "No," he said. "I don't like any aspect of this thing but I like yours least of all. There are worse things than death, even racial death. You've hunted me across the Solar System and now you've got me cornered and it's time I started fighting back."

"You fool—"

Kreega blanked the screen. For a moment longer he stood without moving and then he pulled his weary body erect and the old war-flames danced in his eyes.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Oh, Lars, Lars, Lars!" Phyllia was in his arms, sobbing, kissing him, pulling his face down to hers. After a long while he looked up to meet Kreega's bleak gaze.

"I don't know," Fredison said. "Have you any ideas? Maybe it is best to dissolve the globe now, wipe everything out, hope for some turn of luck after we're dead. I don't know."

"Not yet!" The Martian was suddenly galvanized. "There are ways out of this place, and the *Ares* can't be so far off. Before all the Powers, we'll carry the fight to them!"

THE man held the girl close, not thinking, not believing or hoping, straining himself to this moment and this woman. They hadn't long to live and life was desperately sweet. He had her now and that was almost enough.

Kreega was snapping orders, a metallic rattle of sound which sent the other Martians bounding off. Then he whirled on the two humans.

"The fort will be held," he said. "Our men will make a fight to the death, delay the enemy, make them think we're trying to defend you. Meanwhile, you'll be on your way . . . Come on!"

Fredison held the girl close, felt her lips

trembling under his and tasted the salt of tears on them. Then, with a sudden bitter violence, he pulled himself free and slammed down his helmet.

They went out the airlock and up the stairway and down the ruinous hallway. When they emerged in the courtyard it was night and they groped across the pitted, rubble-covered expanse toward the mesa edge.

A deeper drone resounded, rocket flames trailing across the sky, and then there were smaller spurts of fire high up among the stars. Airborne infantry, the Mars Patrol coming down on one-man impellor units.

Fredison's eyes, adjusting to the dimness, saw the natives slipping into shelter. Rubble heaps, doorways, the cold thin starlight glittered off their guns. It would be a cruel fight, and he had to run, he had to run.

Two other loping figures were beside them. Even in the night, Fredison recognized the brothers Iggidan and Hraestoh. These owlies were becoming real to him, individuals with faces and minds, dreams and wills and longings of their own. Kreega led the way, scrambling over the broken shards of the fortress, and Phyllia stayed close by the man.

They jumped the low wall at the cliff edge and started down. Kreega pointed north. "The troop carriers came that way," he said, "so their mother ship must lie in that direction. Now—careful!"

But he reached out a thin hand and held Phyllia back. "Here," he said, handing her the trumpet, "take this, I feel I will not have the chance of using it again."

The mesa slope was a nightmarish jumble of bluffs, crags, gullies, and scree, glooming against the dark. Fredison slung the energy globe into the pouch on his back. Both hands were needed for this descent. He wondered if his frequent falls would break anything in that apparatus.

Down and down, crawling over rocks, springing off bluffs to land in a scream and rattle of detritus, grabbing needles of age-rotted stone that crumbled under their weight, gasping the thick foul air within the suits, helping each other along the way. Down, down to the hills that were a pit of night, down through shadows and vague stippling of luminance. Down.

Behind them, star shells exploded, lim-

ring the mesa in a savage blue-white incandescence. The bark of grenades and the cough of mortars and the flat hard chatter of machine-guns echoed between shivering rocks. The Patrol had landed and was fighting up there. Down!

A sudden burst of fire, explosion of smoke and dust, a stray shell had landed nearby. Rocks began to slide underfoot, Fredison lost his feet and went tumbling to the bottom of the slope. He picked himself up, shaking the dizziness out of his head, and checked the energy disruptor with frantic care. Still intact, as far as he could see, but how long could it last? How much more could it take?

VI

THEY paused at the bottom of the mesa, their breathing loud and harsh, and looked up.

Its black mass loomed huge above them, climbing toward the sky, a vastness of shadow and stillness and wind-graven outline. From its heights came the blink of fire. The rattle of war floated vaguely down to them, but it seemed far away now, far and faint and unreal. Only the Martian night was real.

The sky was enormous overhead, a vault of infinite black studded with the wintry constellations of Mars. Not the velvet dark of Earth—in this thin air the night was cold and clear as frosty glass, the stars hung enormous, needle-sharp, bitterly brilliant.

Phobos was a tiny hurrying speck near the curdled silver of the Milky Way, a glitter of starlight picking the ragged hills out of shadow. Low in the north, the Great Bear wheeled, flashing and flashing out of the steely dark. It was so cold that Fredison could hear the frost ringing in the hills, an underground shudder toning beneath the icy stars. A wind was blowing, a thin searching ghost of wind that carried night and cold and the restless shadows on its way. Dust-devils whirled gray-white in the unreal luminance. Far and far away a wild rock-hound yelped and the lonesome echoes answered him.

The chill unearthly splendor of it caught at Fredison. The big silence and the ancient landscape, a world hard and open, bitterly

beautiful, a world that challenged with iron scorn and still gave of itself to those who would respond. He saw Phyllia, her lips half parted, the starlight glimmering in her eyes, and it was a sudden understanding which turned them to each other and clasped hand in gauntleted hand.

"This way," said Kreega.

They went over the hills, through stiff brush which parted with mysterious rustlings as of its own will, over sand-dunes ghostly under the sky, down ravines which were tunnels of darkness. The mesa fell behind them, a threatening shade lost in the reaching enormity of night.

The battle and the desperation faded. They trotted on their way with a feeling of being in some mystic fashion part of the hugeness and ancientness around—as if, thought Fredison, as if all Mars went with them, as if the shadows and the wind were living presences marching to their fight.

Yes, he thought, yes, Mars needed its freedom. It was not Earth, and the Martian destiny was not man's, and to force one into the mold of the other was to bring ruin to both. But together, each seeing that which the other was blind to, each doing that which the other could not, man and Martian could still reach those high cold stars. He was fighting for more than Mars tonight, he was fighting for the future of all sentience everywhere in the universe.

The wind blew over the iron hills with a mocking word of life's littleness and weakness against the enormous threatening powers of blind nature, but its scorn tempered something in that very life, raised a will and an undaunted strength to reply. In that crystal darkness overhead the stars seemed almost near enough to touch.

Only they were five tiny things of flesh and blood and fluttering heart against all the might of an empire which had conquered the planets—five little living creatures and the force which molded suns.

KREEGA paused and the dim chill starlight glistened along the barrel of Hraestoh's rifle. In a few moments Fredison heard it too. He crouched down with the others atop a high steep-walled hill and looked down into the silver-washed valley beyond.

The armor of the Mars Patrol was on its way to the fight, a long snakelike column of tanks and Mars-jeps grinding over the hills, shaking the cliffs with the stolid iron mass of its coming. Fredison saw the great guns and rocket-projectors, the wheeled artillery trundling after, the airsuted men riding the vehicles with machine-guns in hand.

Beside him, Phyllia chuckled. "Rather like using an atomic bomb to kill a fly, isn't it?" she murmured.

"They always travel that way," said Iggidan contemptuously. "We hide in the hills, behind the dunes, down in the gullies, and let them go on their way until we are ready to open up with our own guns. When we've got the column well chopped up, we fade out and they never find us. They can hunt all Mars and they never find us."

Fredison shook his head. "You're killing the wrong people," he said. "Those fellows down there, most of them, don't wish you any special ill. They just do what they're told. One of our worst traits as a race, but it's one we've got and can't really help. But the true enemy is the little gang of men on top who give those orders."

"We've never had a chance at them," said Hraestoh, "before tonight."

"We will," said Fredison. "If we can pull this off tonight, then we will from now on."

"You'll help us?" whispered Phyllia. "Oh, Lars, my darling, you'll help us?"

"Yes," he said.

His mind went on, adding, amplifying. Here was his answer. This was the group which could protect the energy spheres and still be in some measure trusted not to misuse them. If Kreega's shadowy dominions had a few Raihala generators, such as he, Fredison, could easily build for them, they would soon have the weapon which could stand off all foes. But more than that, they would have the power which would make warfare unnecessary.

For the group which controlled the energy globes could sell them to the worlds. Men would abandon the increasingly scarce and expensive fuels for Martian packaged energy—cheap, simple, safe, and incredibly powerful. The industrial interests which now backed the imperialists would find it to their enormous advantage to do business with

Mars instead—and inevitably their support would swing that way too. The Unionist influence would rapidly wane. If in desperation they attempted a coup—well, Mars would have the final weapon and would know which side on Earth to back.

At the same time, Mars would not be likely to attempt imperialism of its own. For one thing, Kreega and the rest of that small and trustworthy group would still control the actual manufacture of the globes, with a goodly share for their own defense.

It would be they who would have the final voice in Martian affairs, and they were not conquest-minded. Moreover, while Mars would be strong enough to maintain its own integrity against outsiders, it would for generations still be too weak to fight unnecessary wars even if such were part of its own strange philosophy and even if the Martians had any particular benefits to gain from conquering the hot, wet, heavy planet of Earth. No, no, it would be a balance-of-power setup, not likely to explode before—

—Before Mars and Earth were so well reconciled that the World Federation could become the Solar Federation!

It was, at least, a goal to strive for. It would be hard, dangerous, heartbreaking at times, but there was no greater dream in all the universe. It might work, or it might not, but it was worth trying, supremely worth trying—and before God, they'd make it work!

Also, thought Fredison, as a nominal rebel I'll be exiled from Earth for years to come. I'll have to become a citizen of the new Martian state and it will be a long time before I can again see green hills and rain and the sea—but this isn't such a bad planet, and Phyllia will be here—

"They are gone now." Kreega's voice was a hoarse whisper on the whining wind. "Come."

THEY started down the rough hillside into the valley, hugging the shadows, gazing ahead with a thrumming tightness along their nerves. The *Ares* must be close.

First, thought Fredison, before any of his bright dreams could even be thought about, first there was this enemy to fight. As long as Clinton and his desperate clique were in charge, the hunt would go on, there would never be a moment to rest and to build,

and the Martian race would be hounded toward extinction. They had to settle the present combat before they could go on to the next.

The *Ares* was the key. The giant mother ship of the Mars Patrol, mobile headquarters, carrier of troops and arms and armor, flying bomber base, was somewhere close at hand. If it could be put out of action, the whole Earth army on Mars would be crippled, would have to retire to the settlements and let Kreega's forces do as they wished outside. Help would, of course, come from Earth, but it would take a long time to gather enough there to be effective—they only had the Security forces, barely sufficient to keep the home planet and Venus in order. Before much could be done from Earth to reconquer Mars, Kreega would have enough energy globes to oppose the new arrivals. Rather than fight a bloody and losing war, with all the problems of interplanetary logistics against them, the humans would be ready to make concessions. It would fit in nicely with the Liberal platform anyway, and the reversals on Mars would have discredited their political rivals.

But if the *Ares* could break the revolt now, before Earth really knew what was going on—well, there was an end of many things and a return of the long night from which man had so lately come.

"There—ahead—against that cliff—"

Fredison strained into the night, trying to adapt his human eyes. The Martian orbs shone like eerie moons beside him, seeing things which were veiled from his gaze. He followed Kreega's gaunt pointing arm and slowly picked the monstrous form of the rocket out of darkness like a metallic whale floundered on a vast and jagged beach.

"Can you destroy them from here?" rasped Iggidan.

"I don't think so," said the human doubtfully. "The energy would spread slowly enough so they'd have time to take off. We have to get closer."

"But then we may be consumed too," said Hraestoh.

"Quite likely," said Kreega. "And what of it? If we can get away, though, things will be well for us. Our forces up on the mesa will see the flash and know we have succeeded and withdraw where the enemy

cannot find them. We ourselves can make our way to a shelter I know of, a friendly human trader's dome—your powerpacks will last that long at least. But if we do not escape, then in any event the *Ares* will be destroyed and the energy secret too."

"If they don't see us coming across that valley and shoot us down," said Fredison.

"It is a chance we must take. Come!"

Fredison turned to Phyllia. The vague starlight shimmered glassily off her helmet, her face was a shadow behind the highlights. It was bitter not to be able to kiss her farewell, not even to see her.

"Wait here," he said huskily. "Wait here and—and goodbye, my dearest."

"No," she said. "I'm coming with you."

"You are not!"

"Come on!" Kreega started over the valley. Fredison cursed, took the energy detonator from his pack, and followed. Phyllia loped beside him, a lithe tall shadow against the cold white glitter of sand.

They sprinted over the valley floor. Half a mile, estimated Fredison, half a mile running in plain sight, slow-crawling target for any heavy machine-gun—half a mile, half a mile, sand scrunching underfoot, the wind moaning and blowing, the stars flashing high overhead, heart thumping and spleen shooting vicious jags of pain through the belly and lungs crying for air—half a mile!

The cliffs ahead swam crazily in his blurring vision. The night roared in his ears. He stumbled and felt a Martian's arm bear him up. Five flitting shadows, run, run, run. The hard rhythm of his boots slammed back into his skull, jarring, pounding. He gulped air through parched mouth and straining nostrils, the starlight flickered off the thing in his hands.

Closer, closer, the ship was a looming immensity now, cold metal against the old rusty cliffs—

Red fire blazed from the night ahead. A madman's laughter and the sand pocked with flying slugs. Iggidan leaped, high up against the star-flaring sky, and tumbled over and over with his blood running black against the sand.

"Iggidan. Iggidan!" Hraestoh's gun barked where he crouched behind a low dune, firing into the throat of the machine-gun. He raved as he fired and someone up ahead screamed.

"Blow them up!" screeched Kreega.

FREDISON knelt in the sand. His clumsy gloved fingers touched a switch and the batteries poured a small glowing fire into the tubes. For a moment he stared numbly, seeing only the energy sphere and its cold blank reflection of the stars above. The machine-gun opened up again. Hraestoh crumpled over his rifle. Phyllia lay prone, shooting at the night-hidden enemy, and the fiery tracers reached out after her.

Fredison saw a blur run over the energy sphere, the reflected sky dissolved in a sudden abysm of night.

"Run!" he shouted. "*Run!*"

They got up and whirled about and fled—Fredison and Kreega and the wild flying loveliness of the girl—spurting over the valley sands back toward shelter. The machine-gun blazed after them, getting a sight on their weaving bodies, yammering between the silent cliffs.

Fredison cast a backward glance.

He saw the sudden gush of pearly white light which stood forth from the ground, a geyser of flame and sparks and vaporized iron. Lord! he thought with a terrible fierce gladness. *Lord, we've got them now!*

The fire leaped higher and higher, white, pitiless, throwing their shadows black ahead of them upon the blinding glare of sand, limning the cliffs and crags against a paling heaven, sheening incandescent off the polished walls of the *Ares*. Below its ardor a pool began to spread, a boiling lake like a new sun in its heart, the red flames of hell dancing on its rim.

Thunders rolled between the valley walls. The wakened giants, who had brawled when the planets were molten blobs of slag, stirred and lifted their heads and bellowed to the stars. The cliffs roared with echoes, riven stone opened up and precipices crashed. The racket filled the world.

Higher and higher poured the flames of

destruction, searing up to lick at the gates of heaven. The *Ares* sank as the ground beneath it grew soft. The pool of liquescence flowed around it and it began to crack with majestic slowness and melt. When it collapsed into the lava lake a spume of boiling iron rained from the angry sky.

There went the backbone of the Patrol and Earth's dominion over Mars. There went Clinton and his murderous dreams. There went the great enemies of freedom—here came the lava!

The ground shook and rumbled underfoot. The sand was blistering hot through heavy-soled boots. They ran, with the flaming ruin of the valley swirling at their heels, ran for shelter on higher ground, ran while the glowing moltenness seethed and spouted and thundered behind them. They felt its incandescence like a fire-wind on their backs. The spurting white geyser lit the world for them and they ran!

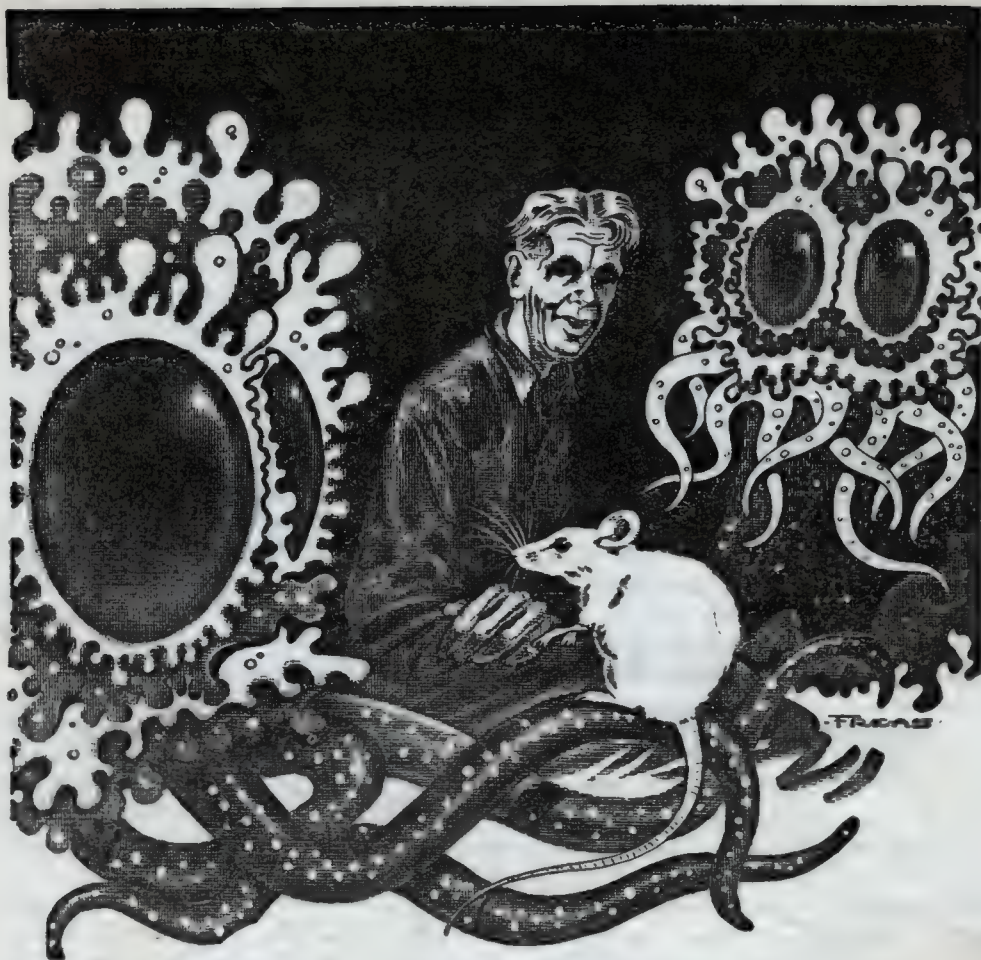
All the long valley was a roiling lake of destruction as they scrambled up the slope of the farther hills. Rock slid downward, ripped loose by the heavings of the tormented strata. A million unchained demons howled in the smoke and vapor and dancing flame.

Phyllia stumbled, fell to hands and knees, and slid toward the fury below. Fredison stopped, threw himself on his belly, caught her in wildly clutching hands. He dragged her back and half carried her to a high bluff.

Kreega had already reached it, his gaunt strange form stood brooding over the seething hell. When he spoke, Fredison could barely hear him above the clamor of outraged energies.

"It is subsiding," said Kreega. "We are safe now."

Phyllia clung to Fredison, sobbing, pressing herself to him against the stiffness of their suits. "Don't ever let me go, Lars, darling, darling," she whispered brokenly. "Don't ever let me go."



CRITERIA

By PETER PHILLIPS

*Who is the wisest human? What's the test?
Umdrad top-rated poor old Digger, though
the world called him an idiot.*

DIGGER, THE AUSSIE, stretched his arms and smiled at the sun. He could almost taste its warmth. Time meant little to him but the winter had seemed unusually long. Now again he could seek his private cairn on the northern coast of the island and bask in the sea-scented air of Spring.

He could lie there, soothed by the passionless murmur of the Atlantic as it ca-

ressed the rocky shore, and watch the lazy gliding of the gulls.

"There," said Umdrad, fining the controls so that the green lines fluoresced sharp and clear on the screen. "That one would be suitable and it is alone."

Nadrad focused vision. They watched the long shambling figure of Digger climb the stepped pile of weatherbeaten rock and

accommodate itself comfortably in a protected niche, hands behind head.

"High," agreed Nadrad. "Dreel it, but not too quickly."

Digger was watching the gulls. He was not particularly surprised when his body was lifted gently upwards. He had always wanted to be a gull. And now he was out-soaring the wide-winged birds. He opened his arms wide, joyous in the freedom of the skies, smiling.

"See," observed Umdrad. "No struggles and contortions like the others. Quite content. Warp him in."

Above him, Digger saw the pale egg-shell blue of the cloudless sky waver a little as though with heat-haze. Then it darkened to the color of a winter sea, to the deep purple of twilight, to the black of night. It became light again in similar gradation; through dusty pink, rose, fading into walls of light metallic gray against which moved two gorgeous splashes of variegated color.

Digger looked at Umdrad and Nadrad in quiet pleasure. "Two fair dinkum sea-anemones," he said. "I ain't seen 'em big as this, not even on the Great Barrier Reef."

Nadrad waved tendrils excitedly. "Quite unconcerned. Surely it will be possible to establish communication with this one?"

Umdrad advanced, laid tendrils gently on Digger's cuff. Digger grinned, showing discolored teeth. "Want ter shake hands, cobber? Well enough. Only you ain't got hands. Want me to go over here, huh?"

Had he been acutely observant rather than merely sympathetic with all creatures that walked, crawled, swam or flew through the air, he would have noted that the resting couch to which Umdrad led him was obviously built to accommodate animals of similar structure to himself. The two "dinkum sea-anemones" had no need of such contrivances.

Digger would make friends with anybody or anything. Only a cynic would say it was because he lacked understanding.

He put delicate fingers into a tattered jacket pocket, felt a complaisant nibble, drew out Mickey. The white mouse sat unconcernedly on his broad palm, preened proud whiskers.

Umdrad flushed green with sudden

thought. "Symbiosis?"

As if in reply, Digger said, "He's just a pal o' mine. Say hello to the strangers, Mickey."

The mouse sniffed cautiously at an extended tendril, decided that what suited Digger was fine by him, too, and scampered with twinkling pink paws along the tendril—an excellent tightrope performance—to sit between Umdrad's great, soft eyes.

UMDRAD'S brain-tissue flushed pink with unusual satisfaction. Or it might have been amusement. He touched the mouse with a tendril, gently, perceiving its vibrations. "Surprisingly high rating for a creature so small."

Nadrad said, somewhat impatiently, "Test the main specimen. It's the first co-operative one we've had. And we don't have a great deal of time."

Umdrad focused a field around Digger's cerebellum, after handing the mouse back to the quiet Aussie, and held up the first of the standard charts. Nadrad watched the screen.

"Sort of game, eh?" said Digger. He focused his vague, kind eyes on the chart. Blue, red, green lines crossed, mingled, straightened, ran in parallel curves, blended. The convolutions, or rather, the half-unconscious effort of following them, seemed to draw at a part of his brain.

Nadrad made notes. Umdrad showed another chart.

"Pretty, I guess," said Digger doubtfully. "Don't see what yer gettin' at. Looks something like a sunset at sea, bottom-up'ards. Nice colors, though."

After several charts had been shown, Nadrad drew a line through a series of points on his pad of material. Umdrad watched.

Nadrad shook his head regretfully. "Highest yet. But still insufficient for the second stage of communication. We're wasting our time. We'll mark the system down for a visit in another half-million revolutions. They may have advanced sufficiently by then. Dreel him down."

Umdrad said, "Wait." He reached into a container, drew out an iridescent, multi-colored pebble. "It might like a keepsake."

"For me? Fair dinkum stone. Certainly pretty." Digger took it with his left hand.

On impulse he held out the mouse with his right. "You can have Mickey. He likes you, and—well, I got lots more. They're all Mickeys. Take good care of 'im. And don't feed 'im too much cheese. Fair hogs it, he does. Liable to bust 'isself."

Umdrad took the mouse, pleased. He told Nadrud, "I feel you are pessimistic in your estimate of a half-million revolutions before it will be worth our while to make another visit. This creature of the higher type will inevitably oust those of the lower index in far less time than that, and will rapidly evolve to communication level."

Digger floated downwards, clasping his twinkling stone.

MATHESON and Saunders were taking their usual after-lunch stroll to the headland, talking desultorily in their usual manner about everything and nothing.

"So they'd search for the highest type, eh?" Matheson said with dispassionate scorn. "You read too much fantasy, Saunders. It's not possible even remotely to imagine, let alone postulate the criteria of completely alien entities.

"What we call intelligence, and rate according to quantitative but basically meaningless symbols, might be mere intuition to them. Remember that our intellect was evolved primarily as a weapon in the struggle to survive. Imagine life evolving in circumstances where there was no need to struggle, either against environment or other life-forms. Would such creatures, given the means to pick terrestrial specimens, seek out our Einsteins and DeSitters, the highest products of our form of evolution? You say yes. I say, not necessarily. Our

thought processes are essentially aggressive, even when our only opponent is a tough problem in physical math, and our brain can only be rated against environment. It's not an absolute. Your idea of a norm against which any intelligence, alien or otherwise, could be measured is a mere parochial earth-bound presumption."

"Off-beam," murmured the younger man. "The rate of adjustment to change must be a universal measure. To take only one aspect—"

"Bah!" Matheson flicked away his cigarette. "That involves yet another assumption—that the time-scale is the same. Don't add to your absurdities by attempting to equate their criteria with our own."

DIGGER came up over the turfy brow of the headland, shambling, mild-faced, rolling a glistening stone in his hand.

"For instance," said Matheson, "take Digger there. How d'you know that your entities wouldn't choose him as the highest representative of the race? He has a higher emphatic index than either of us. And that might be one of their main criteria, not applied intelligence, however you define that . . . Morning, Digger."

But Digger walked by, blind to the men, kindly, vacant eyes on the sky. "Fair beauts," he was murmuring. "Dinkum anemones."

Saunders laughed. "Now who's talking fantasy, Matheson! Poor old Digger. For three weeks I've been trying to teach him how to tie his own shoelaces. He still can't."

Dr. Matheson, superintendent of Fair Isle Colony for the Mentally Deficient, refrained from saying "so what." He was a little tired of the argument.



The Bloodhounds of Zirth

By LLOYD PALMER

No one escaped from Zadda, Earth's grim penal star. The barriers were too steep. The Zirthan guards too clever. The mertha hounds too keen at trailing. Only 4W382ZT won free—though he couldn't beat the awful rap.

THERE was silence in the grim room broken only by the rattle of filing cards from the corner where a trusty, in gray uniform, sat working at a small desk.

Warden Hughes sat at his large desk, idly fingering a small scale-model of a space ship which he used for a paperweight. Across the desk from him, in a stiff-backed,

plastic-covered chair, sat Greg Purnell, special investigator for the Congress of Earth.

Before Purnell had time to speak a bell shrilled on the warden's desk. Hughes tabled the paperweight and picked up the phone. Purnell could not tell from any change of expression what the message might be. The warden listened carefully, grunted an uninforming "Yes, and then?" into the phone, listened some more, and finally hung up. Immediately he lifted it again and dialed a number.

"Send Rol, Dorta, and two mertha to my office at once. Have the helicopter ready to go in ten minutes . . . What? . . . Then have two zerda saddled and ready. Hop to it."

Purnell nodded but the warden had already turned his back and was punching out a code on the panel behind his desk. He had scarcely finished when there was a sigh and a ting. He slid a panel aside and took a flat spool out of the cavity behind it. He placed it carefully in a squat machine which stood beside his desk.

There was evidently nothing more to be done until the arrival of Rol, Dorta, and the two mertha, for the warden settled back in his chair and turned toward Greg.

"That spool is the mentape of 4 W 382 ZT, the prisoner who escaped. You'll see what it's used for in a minute or so."

There was a firm tap at the warden's door. Purnell mentally chalked up a note to commend Hughes for efficiency when he sent in his report. The warden touched a button on his desk and the door swung open violently, pushed aside by two creatures which bounded into the room.

PURNELL jumped up from his chair and bit his lower lip to keep from screaming. Then two tall men followed through the door and the biting, tearing flashes faded out of his mind. He slumped back into his chair. His forehead was covered with fine droplets of perspiration and his shirt fluttered to his heart's violent throbs. Yet Greg Purnell was a hard man who had come face to face with death many times on many strange planets.

Purnell looked over towards the desk in the corner. The trusty had dropped a set of cards and was trying to pick them up. His hands shook so violently that in three

trials he succeeded in getting only two cards back on the desk. His face was pale and the sound of his breathing rasped through the room.

The warden looked over towards the man. "I'm sorry, Jim, I forgot it was your tour of duty. You can leave now."

Jim hastily went through the side door of the room. Purnell turned back towards the warden's desk. Rol and Dorta, for Greg decided that these must be their names, were not men, though almost human. Their faces had two eyes, a nose and a mouth, but no ears.

Purnell had seen natives of many different planets and knew how difficult it was to try to interpret the meaning of an alien expression. But he was certain that Rol and Dorta had absolutely no expressions on their faces. The two mertha walked on all fours and had heads which were more carnivorous looking than the men. They did not have any ears, either. Their appearance would not have disturbed Purnell, except for the memory of his sensations when they had bounded into the room.

The men and the animals were clustered about the squat machine and each one wore a headset from it. The machine was buzzing softly. The buzzing stopped and Rol and Dorta took off all of the headsets. Warden Hughes spoke aloud to them, Purnell supposed out of courtesy to him, although the Zirthans are telepaths.

"Now you know the thought-pattern of the escaped prisoner. The weather over the valley has turned bad, too bad for the helicopter. There are two zerda ready below. Cross the Malu by the lower bridge and cast along down the river. He will probably have turned off through the forest. If he doesn't try to hide there, he will head over the ridge towards Zadda City. He mustn't reach it."

The two Zirthans saluted and silently left the room, followed by the mertha. The warden shrugged his shoulders and spoke to Purnell. "It's up to them, now. I apologize for exposing you to the mertha without warning. But I know that men in your job have healthy hearts. You got a touch of what is in store for that poor devil who got away."

"What are the mertha?" asked Purnell.

"Animals from Zirth," answered the

warden. "They have the same telepathic sense that the men from Zirth have, but can detect thought-patterns many miles away, whereas a Zirthan must be near. Of course they are not very intelligent but they obey simple telepathed orders from the Zirthans."

"But what happened when they came into the room? It was a terrifying feeling." Purnell shivered involuntarily as he spoke of it.

The warden smiled grimly. "Yes, I've experienced it. You see, on Zirth the animals have no sense of hearing but instead can sense things telepathically. The mertha came into the room and sensed a stranger. They were 'barking' and 'growling' at you, but mentally. As soon as Dorta came in he called them off with a mental command."

Purnell crossed his long legs and spoke. "But you told me that your Zirthan guards made escape impossible. How did this fellow get away?"

The warden grunted. "Excuse me, I said planned escape was impossible, and it is. Let a prisoner start making plans to get away and the guards are on to it at once. But this man made no plans. He was out on a work detail and saw a log floating down the river. In an instant he dived into the water and rode the log over the rapids. The guards fired at him but missed, and he made the rapids—they saw him still on the log below the white water. Impromptu action is still possible."

"Pardon me," said Purnell, "I see how that would be. But where could he go? Isn't this planet just a prison colony for Earth?"

"There are a few settlements," answered the warden. "Mostly space rats and prisoners whose terms have been served but who do not want to go back to Earth. And the space pirates have bases on some of the moons and contacts with the villagers. If he gets to a settlement they will hide him until the space pirates take him in. But he can't escape the mertha."

PURNELL looked out the narrow window of the warden's office. The storm driving up the valley had reached them now and rain was beating fiercely against the plastic. He thought of the fugitive stumbling through the fury of the storm and of

the two mertha coming closer and closer until the poor fellow's mind started cringing from the howling of these mental bloodhounds. He turned back to the warden.

"I noticed that you ran the mentape through the machine but didn't show the men any pictures of the escaped man. Are they familiar with his looks?"

"No. They have never seen the man, nor any picture of him." The warden paused to let this statement sink in, then went on before Purnell had a chance to speak. "There would be no use. The Zirthans cannot tell us apart by features. Not only do all of us humans look alike to them because we are alien, but they are not in the habit of using physical looks for such purposes. They have always used mental scanning for that. You notice the total lack of expression on their faces. Anger, hate, love, whatever emotion you think of, is expressed by a Zirthan's thoughts, not by his facial expression. Telepathy has its advantages. Zirthans live in a world of mental calm and honesty that is unknown to us."

The more Purnell thought about this the more he realized that it would be true. To a telepath the mind is an infinitely better source of information than the face would be. And just think, no physical disguise would be of the slightest use.

"What if the man falls asleep? Can the mertha trace him then?"

"Yes," replied the warden. "Thoughts go on in sleep, as when we dream. The mertha can't detect a man as far away when he is asleep, but an escaped prisoner does not go to sleep until he puts as great a distance between him and his prison as he can."

The wind had grown stronger, so strong that the thick plastic over the window shivered slightly. Purnell thanked the galaxy that he wasn't out chasing an escaped prisoner. He never liked those jobs, regardless of the weather. He remembered once when he had gone out with hounds after a murderer. Closer and closer they had come, with the hounds baying and yelping. At the end they trapped the man in a cave and the dogs got in first. It was not a pretty sight and Purnell had found it too easy to think of himself in the other man's shoes. It didn't seem right.

He turned to the warden. "What hap-

pens when the mertha corner the fellow. Do they attack?"

"Not physically, but they leave terrible mental scars unless the men get there quickly and call them off. You saw how Jim acted when they came into the room. They weren't paying any attention to him, but he escaped once and the mertha tracked him down. Now he goes to pieces whenever he sees one of them."

Purnell grunted and pushed himself out of the chair. "It will be quite a while before they can catch him. I am going to the office you were helpful enough to lend me and work on my report. We can finish our business after you get this affair off your mind. Will you let me know how the chase comes out?"

"Yes, Mr. Purnell, I shall be glad to. I'll call you."

The warden turned to a stack of papers on his desk and Purnell strode through the door.

THE water was cold. He clung to the log for as long as he dared but his fingers were getting numb and his thighs could no longer grip the log tightly. It swung close to the left bank and the man slid off it and wearily stroked himself over to the bank. It was steep, and slippery from the rain, but he managed to crawl up. He lay on the wet grass feeling the rain soak through his prison uniform. If he could just close his eyes, but he had to go on. They would be after him in no time at all. The mertha. He shuddered at the thought of the stories he had heard.

The rain was thicker, slanting sharply from the strong wind. It was vile weather but it would keep the helicopters grounded. They wouldn't dare fly in the gusts that were sweeping up the valley. The Zerda were fast but not as fast as a helicopter. If he could get over the ridge and into Zadda City there was always a space scout ready to take an escaped prisoner to the pirates' moon.

He had been walking and running for an eternity. He slipped and stumbled up the long slope to the ridge, gasping for breath and digging his fist into his side to dull the sharp pain that cut him there from the running. He found himself straining to listen through the pounding of the rain.

Then he cursed to himself. There wouldn't be anything to hear, no baying of these hell hounds, the mertha. Nothing for the ear—just torture and anguish for the mind.

He was near the top now. The last pitch was very steep and covered with huge rocks. But what was that faint flicker in his mind? It ebbed and then was back, a little stronger. A roiling, a hand dipping through his skull and stirring his brains. He clenched his fist harder and hauled himself over another boulder.

The mertha were getting closer. The flashes were stabbing harder into his brain now. But how close was that? He had no way of telling. Were they behind him? Or in front? The torment in his mind had no direction. He sobbed as he climbed.

He was on top of the ridge and Zadda City lay in the next valley. Maybe he would make it. But it was getting harder and harder to think, his mind was racked with even greater force. They were getting closer and closer. Hurry, run, run. But were they behind him? Oh, galaxy, had they circled and come up the ridge in front of him? They were closing in ahead of him, he felt it in every searing stroke which flashed through his brain.

He turned sharp right and ran stumblingly along the ridge. Was it a trifle easier? Yes, the flashes were fainter. He ran faster and faster. The torment eased still more and a pale spectre of hope crept into his mind. And then fled. Ahead of him was the end of the ridge, a cliff, vertical and smooth. Before he could scarcely wonder if he had time to turn back, he knew he hadn't. His mind again flinched as a mental blast hit it.

There was a small cabin standing alone at the very edge of the cliff. The windows were tightly boarded and it was evidently derelict. The door hung partly open and through it the fugitive scrambled. He slammed the door shut and by force of desperation managed to shoot the rusty bolt into the hasp.

Inside he stood, wincing occasionally from a thrust into his mind, and staring dumbly and despairingly around the barren room. But it wasn't quite barren. A gleam of hope calmed his mental torture when he saw an old shirt and pair of work pants hanging from a hook in a far corner of

the room. He dashed across the floor, tearing his prison garb off as he went. The dust from the old clothes almost choked him as he flung them on. He cast his hated prison garb into a dark corner and stamped on it. Then he rushed to the door.

He had his hand on the bolt, ready to shove it open, when realization finally came to him. He sank to the floor, numbed. No physical disguise could fool the mertha or the prison guards. They tracked minds, not bodies or uniforms. The dreaded mertha gnawed a man's very brain.

The flaring hope which repulsed the mertha from his mind for the brief period of action there in the cabin had gone out. Again anguish crept into his brain and contorted it. He opened his mouth to shriek, but instead tore the shirt from off his back and stuffed it into his mouth. Gagged, the poor wretch fell to the floor writhing, deprived of the slight relief that screams would have brought to the mind tormented into physical action, but too anguished to realize that screams could not be heard by his earless pursuers.

His mind was filled constantly with torment, now. He hoped and prayed for the arrival of the guards but they did not come. It beat against his brain, pound, pound, pound. In his mind was only the frantic I can't stand it, I can't stand it, I . . .

LATER in the day Purnell was asked to go to Warden Hughes' office. He entered the room with great interest and saw the warden seated at his desk with a glum expression on his face. One of the Zirthan's was standing in front of the desk, but the other one and the two mertha were not in the room.

"Come in, Mr. Purnell," said the warden. "The prisoner got away, the first one to escape since we brought the mertha here two years ago. I waited for you to come before hearing Rol's full report. Here, put on this headset and you can 'hear' his thoughts." The warden handed Purnell one

of the sets from the squat machine. Purnell noticed that the warden and Rol were each wearing one and he quickly adjusted his.

The Zirthan's thoughts sounded deep in his mind, almost like hearing, since his brain translated the thoughts into English words, but yet different enough for Purnell to realize that it wasn't ordinary speech.

"Dorta and I, with the mertha, tracked the prisoner to the final slope of the ridge. Here we had to dismount and follow on foot. At this point we came close enough to sense the man's thought-pattern, so we know we were following the right man. Then he evidently reached the top and speeded up, for we lost touch again. The mertha were far ahead of us when we finally reached the top of the ridge. When we came close to them, they were running around and around a cabin, which we first took to be abandoned, perched at the edge of the cliff. We were still not close enough to sense the fugitive when suddenly the mertha stopped running and started casting around. They had lost the thought-pattern.

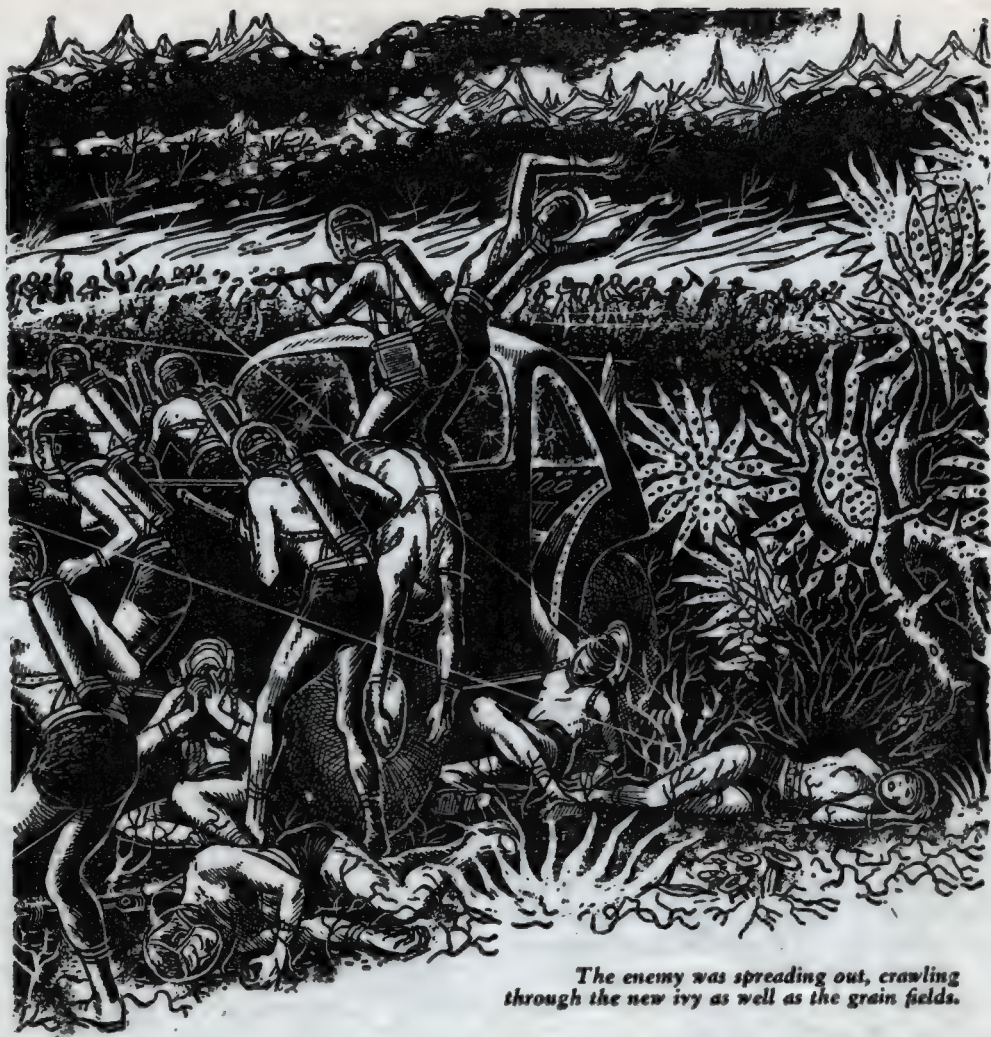
"We had a clear view of the only door of the cabin and we found later that all the windows were nailed shut. We approached the cabin to investigate but before we reached the door it opened and a man came out. Dorta went on past the man into the cabin, which he searched quickly. But he found no one there. I stopped the man and scanned his mind lightly for pattern and knowledge of the fugitive. He was not the escaped convict nor had he seen or heard anyone.

"He was a strange figure, standing there in a pair of dirty old pants and no shirt. He drew himself up to full height and stared at me for an instant. Then he turned and strode off in the direction of Zadda City."

"But didn't you find out who he was," came the warden's thoughts. "What was his name?"

"Oh, I found out his name. He was Napoleon. Napoleon Bonaparte."





The enemy was spreading out, crawling through the new ivy as well as the grain fields.

The Reluctant Colonist

Novelet of Frontier Worlds by J. T. McINTOSH

Venus was strictly one-way. No return for Terrans. A rough deal—particularly for gay Doc Miller, Earth's top society medic, shanghaied at ray-gun point to fight the green and ugly Venus Plague.

GLORIA'S voice floated impersonally over the intercom. "There's a Mr. Balch to see you, Dr. Miller."
 "When's my next appointment?" he asked.
 "In half an hour. Miss Pugh,"

"Very well, send him in."
 Gloria might have told him, the doctor thought, as Balch came in quietly and closed the door behind him, that the visitor was a Venusian. But some of them were touchy, and Balch must have been able to hear what

she said. Most Venusians liked to think that they could not be distinguished from Earthmen.

"Please sit down, Mr. Balch," said the doctor. "You wish to consult me?"

Balch didn't reply at once. He was clearly trying to assess Dr. Miller. That suited the doctor. It gave him a chance to assess Balch too.

The colony on Venus was only fifty years old, so Balch's parents or grandparents must have been born on Earth. Venusians had every excuse for thinking they looked exactly like Earthmen. They did, in everything that could be put down on paper. They were no taller, no shorter. If they were heavily tanned, they were no darker than many Californians. They walked slowly and somewhat hesitantly, no matter how long they had lived on Earth, but so did many Earthmen. The only really peculiar thing about them was that the penetrative Venusian sun tanned them all over, so that even at thighs and back and groin their skin was that same golden brown, no lighter and no darker than at hands and face. But one didn't ask a Venusian to strip naked, and didn't have to.

One could tell a Venusian without exactly knowing how. Perhaps it was all the little things unconsciously added up; perhaps it was a sixth sense that told people when they met a Venusian that this man had lived on another world.

"Not personally," said Balch at last. "I'm not ill, Doctor, and if I were I don't think I'd come to you. Your patients are nearly all women, aren't they? All right, mostly young, frequently attractive, and very seldom really ill."

"I'm a doctor," said Rodney Miller with gentle reproof.

"Oh, sure. A good doctor, too, or I wouldn't be here. But what makes you the most successful doctor on Earth isn't your medical knowledge. It's your dark wavy hair, your white teeth, your six-feet-three, the way you can weigh up wealthy patients, and the fact that you have too much of a pull ever to be struck off the medical register. No need to press that button, Doctor. I'm only showing you I know quite a lot about you."

"Well?" said Dr. Miller coldly.

"You've heard about the trouble on

Venus, Doctor?"

"I saw something in the papers. A new epidemic of some sort."

"Of course you wouldn't know much about it," said the Venusian quietly. "What is it to you. Thousands of people dying on a planet at least twenty-six million miles away, usually more. Nothing to interest you in that."

DR. MILLER shrugged. "I can't see anyone who has this disease. At best I can only read a Venusian doctor's report."

"It's your job now, Doctor," Balch murmured. "We think you're the one man who can find the answer. We want you to go out to Venus. No, don't say anything yet. I told you I know a lot about you. I didn't come to you simply because you're the most successful doctor on Earth. That's irrelevant. I came to you because we decided that you were the *best* doctor on Earth. The best for a job like this. The man who can help us, if we can tear him away from making money and playing golf and swimming and going to night-clubs with patients and drawing up diet charts to take a few pounds off women who'll do anything for their looks but take exercise. I'm a sort of unofficial Venusian ambassador to Earth, Doctor. We want you, and it's my job to get you."

Rodney Miller thought it over and saw nothing wrong with the idea. He murmured to himself, "Well, I don't see why I shouldn't . . ."

"I'll even tell you why you shouldn't go," Balch said. "You'd have to go as a colonist, like everyone else. The only transport between Earth and Venus is the official interplanetary service. We don't run it. Earth's government does."

Miller thought rapidly. Didn't you have to sign a declaration?

"When would I get back?" he demanded.

Balch smiled faintly. "That's just it, Doctor," he said. "You'll never get back."

"Then I can give you my answer right away. In one short, simple word. No."

Balch nodded. "That's what I thought. Stand up, Doctor, will you."

He still spoke quietly, coldly, but the small ray-pistol he had produced covered Miller unwaveringly. The doctor stood up.

"You can't take me by force," he said evenly.

"Maybe not. But I'm going to try. First, let's get this straight. Venus is my world. I've lived on Earth for five years, and I'll live here till I die. But that will be a long time yet, and all that time I'll be working for Venus. Not necessarily for Venus against Earth. But always for Venus first. I'm quite ready to die for Venus. If you raise the alarm now, or in the next hour or so while you're with me, I'll kill you. You'll have your revenge. I'll die too. But it won't matter much to you, will it?"

Miller knew Balch would do it. The man wasn't a fanatic, that was the frightening thing. He was a patriot, balancing loyalties as all patriots must. Balch would probably stand up for his own district against all the rest of Venus. Then for all Venus against all Earth. Then for the Earth-Venus system against anything else in the galaxy. But in this case it was only Venus against one Earthman—a doctor who might be able to help Venus. So he would shoot all right.

"We'll go out together," said Balch. "You'll tell you secretary something—anything that will explain your going out with me."

"That won't be easy. I have a patient in a few minutes."

"To hell with your patient. Tell your secretary what you like. Lay a trap for me if you want to—it will only mean the two of us die. I'm going to stay so close to you that even if someone shoots me I'll get you first. Got that?"

A FEW moments later Dr. Miller came out of his consulting room, followed closely by the Venusian. He stopped by Gloria's desk.

"Tell Miss Pugh I had an urgent case," he said. "You know the sort of thing to say."

"Yes, Doctor." Gloria was a plain, efficient girl, who understood that she wasn't meant to compete with her employer's clients. So she was even plainer, in office hours, than she might have been. That was part of her efficiency. "How long will you be?"

Miller glanced at Balch. The ray-gun was out of sight now, but he could shoot from his pocket.

"Quite a while, I expect," he said casually.

They walked to the emigration center

which was only a few blocks away. Miller reflected that Balch probably had picked his times so that his plan would succeed. There would be no delay at the center. Balch had almost certainly warned them that he was bringing a new colonist. There would be a ship leaving that day, and Miller would be whisked away with no chance to do anything without getting a bullet through him. He had a high enough opinion of Balch's capabilities to be pretty sure of that.

So he was going to Venus. Unless something unexpected gave him a chance, he was spending his last few hours—perhaps minutes—on Earth. For he had no intention of dying. Balch was right. It would give him no satisfaction to know that the man who had killed him would also die.

The center was very busy. Balch knew the ropes, of course. He led Miller through the bustle in the main hall to a private room, knocked on the door, and nudged Miller inside in front of him. There was a desk littered with papers and an official sitting behind it.

"This is the man I was telling you about, Bill," said Balch.

"You cut it fine," the man grumbled. "Just forty minutes before the last car leaves for the spaceport."

"It's enough."

The official was an Earthman. But as Miller began to search feverishly for something that would give him the chance he was looking for, he sensed something. The official, this fat Earthman, this Bill Somebody, was on Balch's side. There was something between them. Perhaps Bill didn't know the whole story—and he didn't want to know. Balch had prepared the way. The official knew this wasn't an ordinary emigration but he was determined to pretend it was. And another hope died in Miller—another hope of finding some way to save his life on Earth, safe, easy, secure, successful.

"The forms are all filled out," said the official. "They only need your signature, Mr. Miller."

"Dr. Miller," corrected the doctor, still ready to try anything that might make it impossible for him to leave.

"Doctor it says here," said the official. "Now before you sign I have to tell you all the conditions . . ."

"He knows them," said Balch. "He's ready to sign."

The official shrugged and handed Miller a sheaf of forms. Miller wondered what would happen if he just stood there making no move to sign. How long would Balch wait? And then what would he do?

"Got a pen, Rod?" asked Balch easily. Dissociating himself from them, the official turned back to the other papers on the desk, determined not to see anything he didn't want to see. Miller felt Balch's gun in his back.

He signed. He had to sign seven times. He tried to miss one of the forms but Balch made sure he didn't miss anything.

Then there was a brief medical examination. But even then Miller couldn't slip Balch. He stood there, smoking a cigarette, while Miller stood naked and was probed and tapped. It was quick, but surprisingly thorough. He guessed the center's doctors didn't miss much. There was an eye test, a blood test, a dental checkup, all the usual things. The doctors and dentists and oculists didn't seem much concerned about details. What they were looking for was general fitness. They found it.

For once Miller wished he wasn't quite so perfect physically. The doctors weren't in Balch's scheme the way Bill was. Well, perhaps one or two of them, but not all.

HE FOUND himself in a closed car, still with Balch, making for the spaceport.

"You might look up my mother," said Balch. "You'll like her. Everybody does. You'll find her at Lexport, where you land. But maybe on second thought you'd better not look her up yet. You might not say the right things about me."

Unexpectedly, even to himself, Miller grinned. "I like you, Balch," he said. "Maybe I will look up your mother. And say the right things."

"I don't know about you," said Balch slowly, apparently troubled by the new factor in their brief acquaintance. "According to most of your record you ought to be a heel. But there's other things in your record that I'd like to see in mine. I hope you're just about to add another of those things."

Miller was still hoping. He knew Balch wasn't going with him. That meant Balch had to leave him sometime. It might be a

chance. He wasn't counting on it, but at least he was ready for it.

The ship was like a teardrop lying on its side. Miller had seen pictures of ships like this, but he had never been near one. He was the last to arrive. Everyone else was already on board. If he was going to slip Balch it had to be soon.

He wished he had read a little more about spaceships and about the whole routine. There were plenty of books about it, if he had only taken the trouble to read one of them. As it was, the whole thing was strange to him, and he was thus at a disadvantage with Balch who seemed to know exactly what was going to happen.

There were no sightseers, no relatives bidding farewell to the colonists. They had been left behind at the emigration center. But still Balch seemed able to move about with him without hindrance. He even came into the ship with him.

Miller was surprised at the interior. The journey, he knew, took only a matter of minutes, so there was no need for special quarters for the travellers. They all sat in a vast round chamber in the center of the ship. There were about fifty of them, men and women, young and old; but not very young nor very old. The youngest seemed about eighteen but were probably twenty-one. The oldest were no more than forty-five. They were all already seated in a big circle round the room, looking up with nervous interest, like people in a dentist's waiting-room, as Miller and Balch came in.

Then Miller saw the white-coated attendants making a round, and knew that his chance was gone. Gone completely, if Balch didn't have to leave soon. For as the attendants came up to each passenger they bared his arm and gave him an injection—and when they left him he was completely flaccid, utterly relaxed in his armchair.

Miller looked closely at some of the passengers the attendants had left. They were not unconscious, he decided. Their eyes remained open and their stare was not vacant. But they were absolutely motionless. Whatever the injection was, it robbed people of all power of movement. The chairs were designed to hold them steady.

Most of the others were dressed non-committally but next to Miller was a girl in the uniform of a nurse. He watched as

the three men in white coats rolled up her sleeve. She was perfectly calm. She must have seen this sort of thing done hundreds of times. As he had. It drew them together, he felt.

Then the girl was limp and they were coming to him.

"Off the ship," said one of them to Balch. Miller looked up eagerly. But they already had his arm out of his jacket, and they went on rolling up his shirt-sleeve as Balch moved slowly to go out, looking over his shoulder. One of the attendants got between Miller and Balch, and Miller thought *now!* But then he relaxed, knowing Balch might shoot anyway and the attendant bending over him had a life, too, that he probably thought a good deal of and wanted to keep.

He glanced at the girl next to him again and suddenly he froze. He had not felt the jab. He tried to say something, but he was encased in ice. He couldn't blink. He could no longer feel his chair. He was neither hot nor cold.

But he could see. His eyes were fixed on the little hollow where the girl's throat ended. He couldn't quite see her eyes. Only her neck, her chin, her mouth half open as if she was going to bite her lip, the discreet V of her blue tunic. He knew he would remember it till he died. No one ever looked as long at one spot in the ordinary course of events.

He realized he couldn't hear, only see. Time passed—he didn't know how long. There was no way to close his eyes. He might have to look at the nurse's throat for all eternity. Nothing moved. He wished he had been looking into the girl's eyes. He felt they could have held a conversation with the one part of them that was conscious.

Surely it shouldn't take as long as this. Eleven minutes, he had heard. He was sure it was eleven minutes the journey from Earth to Venus took. But then, that was from atmosphere to atmosphere. First they had to climb out of the Earth's blanket of air and then after travelling millions of miles in a few minutes they had to drop slowly into Venus's atmosphere.

Presently he realized he could hear again. The drug was beginning to wear off. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. The

people who had been drugged first were beginning to waken.

Then he could almost move. He began to feel his chair again. And just a matter of seconds before he could shift his eyes, his view changed as the girl next to him drew a deep breath and sat up. Instead of her throat he was looking into her eyes. They were deep blue, like the sea flecked with sunlight. They were interested. They were beautiful.

SHE leaned towards him curiously. "Aren't you Dr. Miller?" she asked.

He found he could nod. The paralysis left as quickly as it had come. He felt his eyes smarting and blinking rapidly once or twice. That was all.

The girl wasn't thinking about blinking. Her eyes went round with surprise.

"Then the things they say about you aren't true," she said quickly. "They can't be, if you're ready to give up everything you have on Earth to come and help the colonists at a time like this."

"Why not?" asked Miller, amused. The thing was done, he was as good as on Venus. So he might as well make the best of it.

"Because, Venus has nothing to offer you but hard work and a new disease that may kill you. Others have come out to help, but no rich doctors, nobody who's made his way on Earth."

"You came," he said.

"I've nothing to lose."

Miller rose to his feet, stretching himself. "You can save your praise," he said. "I didn't come out because I wanted to. Did you see that man who came in with me? He had a gun in his pocket. He also had the passive cooperation of half the interplanetary service. So he got me to Venus all right."

The girl stared at him. "But . . ." she said, then smiled uncomprehendingly. "You take it very calmly."

"Why not? I'm here. I can't get back. I signed the forms. I'll make a protest to the authorities here when they meet me, but I don't expect it will do any good. What's your name?"

"Erskine Cursiter."

"That's a name and a half. Don't you have an easy version for friends?"

She laughed. "No, people get used to calling me Erskine," she said. She liked him, that was obvious. But then, women always liked him. There was nothing new in that. The only unusual feature about it was that it was a long time since he had bothered to make himself attractive to anyone with less than five million dollars.

Why not take it calmly? he thought. Of course the declaration had to be strict. The run from Earth to Venus cost about ten thousand dollars per person and the government footed the bill. You couldn't have people going out to Venus, deciding they didn't like the climate, and coming back on the next ship. So it was very natural enough that it was made strictly a one-way trip. Very few people did any travelling back and forth between the worlds. But it wasn't unknown. Perhaps they hadn't signed a contract. But still . . .

If he cracked this epidemic, he was going to be a big man among the Venusians. And now that he was here, he was going to crack it or die trying. When it was over, the authorities would be ready to tear up so unimportant a thing as a declaration. At any rate, that was how he saw it.

There was an official reception, which made it difficult for him to protest. Miller didn't have time at first to see much of Venus for whenever the ship landed he was surrounded by men and women of all ages, some in uniform, some in overalls, some in formal dress and some all but naked, but all typed by the green armband they all wore. They were officials of a sort. They were going to sweep Miller away with them, but he clung to Erskine.

"After all," he said, "we're going to work together. We might as well start now."

II.

IT WAS almost anticlimactic, after all he had heard of Venus's plight, to see the busy streets of Lexport, like any new Earth city, thronged with people who seemed healthy and happy and not at all concerned about any epidemic. He had seen cities hit by smallpox or diphtheria. They were not like this.

"Looks to me," he said, as he and Erskine and Dr. McDonald surveyed the busy streets from McDonald's seventh-floor veranda, "as

if you're giving this outbreak all the help you can. Do you *want* it to spread?"

"This is nothing like the epidemics you knew, Dr. Miller," said McDonald. He had met Miller in the spaceship and had been with him ever since. The Venusians had been pleasantly surprised to find that although their agent, Balch, had had to kidnap Miller, he seemed to bear no malice and showed a burning enthusiasm to get on with the job. McDonald was one of the best doctors on the planet, Miller had been told. He had been in charge of the arrangements for dealing with the epidemic until Miller arrived, and would help him all he could.

He was a tall, frighteningly thin man. Miller felt that if he hit McDonald a sharp blow at the waist with the back of his hand McDonald's spine would break and he would collapse in two pieces. He had no chest, no stomach, no behind; he was straight and thin all the way down like a telegraph pole. And he didn't help it by wearing tight black linen clothes.

"Then why did you want me?" Miller demanded.

"I've read your book on epidemics," said McDonald. "I know you probably wrote it merely for relaxation"—he smiled wryly—"but it showed you're always ready to cast accepted methods overboard and build up a whole new method of control. It also showed you had a truer picture of the nature of epidemics than any other doctor before or since. I don't know why it should be you who wrote a book like that. It wasn't the society doctor we wanted here. It was the man who wrote that book—probably, I suspect, when the society doctor wasn't looking."

Miller grinned. "Go on," he invited. "You haven't told me much about this particular epidemic."

"And I won't. You can read it in the reports. You seem to be able to get more from reports than anyone I ever knew. But the first thing is this. It isn't a city epidemic. The disease—we've called it *jaune*—seems to hit areas rather than groups. If it hit this city, though it's confined itself to small towns so far, we could move the people and the outbreak wouldn't exactly spread. We'd be able to control it in the new district—but not here."

"It's not infectious, then?"

"It's not *only* infectious, anyway. People get it who have never been exposed to infection. And others don't get it though they have. But you can get it all in the reports. Or most of it, and then you'll want to ask me things. Shall I leave you with them?"

"If you like." Miller hefted a folder in his hand. "Do I have to go through all this?"

"You'll know yourself what you have to go through. If you want anything, ring."

He left them on the veranda.

"Do you want me to go too?" asked Erskine.

Miller threw the folder into his seat. "No. Let's have a look at these people for a moment."

"Time may be precious," she said reproachfully.

"But so is my state of mind. I won't be much good if I can't keep perspective. And so far, on Venus, I haven't *got* perspective."

THEY looked down at the streets. Very little on Venus was standardized, yet. Some of the cars and trucks were new, gleaming models from one of the factories, others were strange vehicles made by the owners themselves with the help of a few friends.

The buildings, too—some of them were magnificent and beautifully planned, and others were the catch-as-catch-can early structures built of a rubbly Venusian stone a little like gray coral. Eventually these would be pulled down and fresh buildings would take their places. But as yet there were few buildings that the Venusians had no use for. Having had no time to build new ones, they had propped the old ones up carefully to last for a few more years.

And then there were the clothes people wore. The nearest thing to this in Miller's experience was an industrial town on the seafront back on Earth, where holidaymakers mingled with black-coated clerks and greasy mechanics and dusty builders, where you might be passed by a man in a white coat, then a sweating clerk in a starched collar, a girl in a playsuit, a shopgirl in white overalls, a man wearing only bathing trunks, an old woman in the fashion of thirty years since.

But Lexport was even wilder in its con-

trasts. In the winter temperatures of eighty, people were so busy making a new world they didn't seem to have time to change their clothes. They went out in what they had worn in their houses, or at work, and so printers walked the streets with ink on their hands and faces, executives hurried about in their shirt-sleeves and green eyeshades, women out shopping wore soiled overalls or the bra and trunks in which they had been trying to keep cool doing the housework, young children ran about quite naked, and bakers went about covered with flour. Convention in dress took time, and Venus had no time to spare. Everyone had too much to do.

Miller turned from the spectacle with a sigh. Looking away from it, he might be on Earth. There was nothing unusual about the veranda, and Erskine had changed out of her uniform into a plain blouse and skirt. She would have looked strange in the streets. Here the normal thing was bizarre.

"All right," he said. "Let's look at those reports. You might as well see them too. The sooner we both know about this epidemic that isn't an epidemic the better."

"Do you want me to work with you, Doctor?" she asked.

"Call me Rod. After this is all over we'll start figuring out whether it means anything or not."

She gave him one of her beautiful smiles, beautiful because she was not merely twisting her lips in an amiable snarl that meant nothing, as so many smiles were.

They read for a long time, Erskine reading every word, Miller skipping whole sheafs and then reading and re-reading carefully. They were good reports. He began to get a picture of the disease, how it had struck, and what might eventually happen.

Two years before the disease had been unknown. Venus had had life of a sort before the Earthmen came, but none of it remotely resembling intelligent life. The greatest intelligence they had discovered had been that of the plants.

But then Venus had been an inimical world, with an atmosphere that no Earthman could breathe. He had set out to change that in a dozen independent ways. He set up chemical plants that sucked in the poison that was the atmosphere of Venus and breathed out oxygen and nitrogen. He ex-

ploded bombs that killed the Venusian air and made it harmless. He blew vast clouds of poison into space. He released oxygen from some of Venus's many rich oxides. The quality of the Earth-type atmosphere wasn't, at first, of much importance—only the quantity.

These methods would have succeeded, but not for hundreds of years, and by that time the colonists would have evolved into a very different type of life. What they wanted was a world as much like Earth as possible, in a hurry. Naturally they sought the aid of plants. Some died at once, choked by the rich soil of Venus. Others thrived, and immediately mutated.

The colonists—who already called themselves Venusians—became a world of botanists, everyone experimenting with new strains. No one was likely to do any harm. Everyone was looking for the same thing, a plant that grew like a pestilence and transformed Venus's poison to Earth's air.

THEY found it, or rather, them, for soon there were a hundred different varieties all madly turning out oxygen like a vast chemical plant. The colonists still had their atmosphere plant for control. The plants gave them something to control.

Only twenty years after the first human landed on Venus, the colonists began to take off their masks. And now, thirty years later, Venus's atmosphere was hardly half a point off Earth's.

It had been the end of all native Venusian life. Nobody cared much. The slimy things that crawled and writhed soon died, putrified, and richened the soil. Venus was twice as healthy as Earth.

Then came *jaune*. It killed at first scores, then hundreds, then thousand. Then scores again as the doctors began to learn a little about it.

It would attack an area, usually not more than ten square miles, near a town, but always a small town. If the people stayed where they were they all died, or almost did. If they were moved to another region, most of them still died, but some recovered, and there were few new cases. But the original danger-spot remained as dangerous as ever. And these areas were growing.

They covered in aggregate a fifth of the planet's land surface by the time Miller

landed. The total deathroll ran into hundreds of thousands. Venusians had been breeding like rabbits. Now they hesitated, knowing that instead of almost unlimited land they had less and less every month.

Miller laid the files aside.

"Let's get out and have a look round," he said.

The girl rose. "Shall I ring for McDonald?"

"No. Let's go out unescorted. I've seen enough officially for a while. I'd like to see a little unofficially now."

He didn't pick up his coat. He would look more natural in the streets without it. He looked quizzically at Erskine.

"Do you think we can pass as Venusians?" he asked.

She shook her auburn head. "They know us as we know them," she said. "But what does it matter? We're colonists like them, aren't we."

They went down by the stairs so that they wouldn't meet anyone coming up in the elevator. They found a back door and went out into the hot streets.

There were curious glances cast at them.

"It must be our clothes," he remarked absently to Erskine. "Nobody else is dressed quite like us. They know we've just come from Earth."

"I suppose it must be," the girl agreed. "Do you want to go back and change?"

"No, I want to see what happens next. If anything."

"You think something will?"

"There are two men behind us who must be following us. Don't look. They aren't armed, and I think I can handle them if need be. Are you going to stick it out or would you like to go back?"

"I'll stick it out—what do you think?"

"Then we'll go somewhere quiet and see if anything happens."

As they passed a glittering window-faced new shop Erskine said, "You mean those two in bathing trunks? That's one advantage of that outfit. You can see they're not armed."

"Erskine," said Miller casually. "You look pretty strong. Are you?"

"I think so."

"Do I have to handle them both, or do you think you can help?"

"If anything happens you can leave one

to me. I can keep him busy, anyway. Don't worry."

"That's what I thought. In here."

THEY turned into a narrow court between two of the oldest buildings. Faintly, straining for the sound, Miller heard bare feet behind him.

He let one of them launch himself at his back, bent down and threw him over it. Then he turned quickly, but Erskine had a neat armlock on the other. As an attack it was a complete flop. The man he had thrown had struck his head on a wall and was half unconscious.

"Well," he said, addressing the man Erskine was holding. "What gives?"

The man panted but said nothing.

"Erskine, do you mind being brutal or would you rather I took over?"

"You do it," said the girl.

Miller took the man and shook him till his head looked ready to fly off.

"Stop!" the man panted. "I'll tell you."

Instead of listening Miller threw him aside, grabbed Erskine's arm, and pulled her away.

"Run!" he shouted.

She didn't waste time arguing, but followed him. She cast one glance over her shoulder and saw the men pouring into the court. There were at least a dozen of them.

"We did exactly as we were meant to," gasped Miller. "Those two were decoys—small, obviously unarmed, to make us think we could easily handle them."

The men behind them weren't unarmed. Something whistled past Miller, and as he reached a tunnel that led to a main street he caught Erskine again and pulled her through it.

They weren't followed through the tunnel. Even before they reached it they had been gaining on their pursuers.

"That's one thing to remember," Miller said, as they slowed to a walk in the busy street. "We have the legs of them. Gravity's less here and we're used to Earth."

"What could they have against us?" Erskine wondered. "Were they just thieves?"

"No. We're obviously not carrying anything. They must know who we are."

"But surely your job here is to benefit the whole of Venus?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you. Let's get back to McDonald's apartment."

"You don't think . . ." Erskine hesitated. "Couldn't we go back and see if the man you knocked out is still there? We might learn something from him."

Miller grinned grimly. "Far from being the scary type you've got too much nerve," he remarked. "You'd do it, too. No, I'd like to try it, but if they guessed we'd ambush those two who were following us, they might guess we'd come back for the man I knocked out. If so, we'll let them wait."

When they were back in McDonald's suite Miller heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well, that's another thing settled," he said.

Erskine looked at him inquiringly.

"They don't want to kill us. It would have been easy. They knew we had to come back here—it's the only place we can go, unless to the police. They could have had a man at any one of fifty windows, ready to take a shot at us. But they didn't. So it looks as if they wanted to capture us, not kill us."

McDonald came out of another room as he spoke, and froze at the word.

"Kill you?" he exclaimed. "What's been going on?"

Miller looked at him keenly. "Do you know of any rival party—anyone who doesn't want the epidemic to be stopped?"

McDonald stared at him. No. It's fantastic."

Miller dropped his gaze, satisfied. "I trust you, McDonald," he said. "You really don't know of any set that would want to put me out of the way?"

"There can't be one," said the doctor positively. "Most people know about you and what you're here for. They don't all believe you can do anything. But they're all hoping. What's this about killing?"

RAPIDLY Miller told him what had happened. McDonald was perturbed, but more puzzled than perturbed.

"You're sure they couldn't simply be thieves?" he asked. "We don't have many of them here. But . . ."

"Look at us," said Miller, turning round like a model. He wore a silk shirt and flannels. "What would a thief expect to get away with? Ransom?"

McDonald started. "Maybe you have

something," he said. "Whether you can do anything or not, you mean a lot to us. If they'd got you and asked us for ransom, we'd have paid."

"Maybe," said Miller. "It makes sense. But there's another thing just beginning to scratch at my mind. If there's anything in it, it's not a doctor you need. Just anyone with a little intelligence—who wasn't a Venusian."

McDonald nodded. "We thought of that," he said. "That was another reason why we wanted you. There might be things any Venusian would miss, but that an Earthman would see straight away. And by the way, there's something I have to tell you. It's about the circumstances of bringing you here. You . . ."

"Leave that just now," said Miller. "We can come to that once this thing is settled."

McDonald looked relieved.

Just then the phone bell rang. He picked it up. "It's for you," he told Miller.

"Maybe it'll tell us something," said Miller. He took the instrument.

There was no introduction. The voice at the other end of the wire said abruptly, "I was behind the attack on you just now. But I've just learned something I didn't know. It wasn't necessary. Can I see you?"

Miller covered the mouthpiece. "Someone wants to tell me why we were shot at just now," he told McDonald and Erskine. Into the phone he said, "I'd certainly like to know what it's all about. But don't bring your gang."

"Here's what I suggest," said the voice. "Get McDonald out of the way. Tell him as much as you like. But get him out of his apartment and make him promise I can come and see you and leave without being seen."

"I can see me doing that," said Miller sarcastically.

"Have the girl who was with you let me in. She can make sure I'm alone and unarmed. Then when she tells you it's all right, you can see me. I'll take your word it's safe for me to come. You might trust me a little too. You don't have to trust me very far."

"All right," assented Miller. "I'm curious."

He hung up and told the others what had been said.

"You're crazy," said McDonald. "He can shoot Erskine and go looking for you. Or he can have a weapon she could never find. A pin with poison on the tip or a knife in his boot. Or he can be a tough guy ready to kill you with his bare hands."

"I don't think so," retorted Miller. "I don't think there's any danger to Erskine, or any to me if she makes a careful search. As for killing me with his bare hands"—he grinned and shook his head—"I don't think any woman could do that. And this is a woman."

But he wasn't exactly happy a few minutes later as he stood behind the mirror in McDonald's bedroom and looked through it into the lounge, where Erskine was waiting, reading the *jaune* reports. It was a two-way mirror that could be a mirror on one side and a window on the other. There was also a steel shutter Miller could swing across it.

That was just the trouble. These precautions implied that he couldn't risk his skin but Erskine didn't matter. When he had agreed to the woman's proposal he hadn't seen much risk to Erskine. But there remained the possibility that McDonald was right. Or even that this woman's objective was Erskine, not him. After all, they had been together when the ambush was laid half an hour ago. And they knew so little they could hardly be sure that he was the real objective.

HE WASN'T in love with Erskine. He had known too many beautiful women to fall in love with any of them until he gave himself the okay. But you could like working with a girl without loving her, and Miller thought he would like working with Erskine. He had liked Gloria in the same way. Neither of them made any demands on him.

The buzzer at the door sounded. Miller envied Erskine her calmness as she put aside the paper in her hand and went to the door. Of course, she knew he was watching her. She would act cool even if she was trembling underneath.

Miller surveyed the woman who entered more keenly than he had ever examined a patient. She was a Venusian, which wasn't in accord with one of his half-formed theories—that a group of Earthmen was try-

ing to break up the colony. She was older than Erskine but only thirty or so, which was young for a position of responsibility, even in crime, and if this wasn't crime, what was it?

He heard Erskine's voice, cool and quiet. "Do I call you anything, or do you wish to be known as Madam X?"

"You can call me Charlotte," said the woman, equally calmly. "It's a name I've always disliked, but I won't have it long. I expect you want to make sure I'm not hiding even a needle. Can Miller see us?"

Erskine didn't answer. The woman smiled and added, "Not that it makes any real difference, but I'd like to know."

She was twice as beautiful as Erskine, but it didn't impress Miller. Erskine looked sweet, but Charlotte was beautiful like a cat.

Miller had been building his success on trust in his own judgment of people's appearance for years now and he saw no reason to change his methods. He had been ready to trust the woman, merely on how she looked to him, but he put that aside. It was still possible that her interests and his would coincide, but he didn't trust her, didn't like her, and didn't intend to do anything she wanted without a very good reason.

Erskine might have been a policewoman from the thoroughness of her search. Placidly she examined everything, ignoring the woman's ironic observations that you couldn't hide a gun in the seam of a blouse. Miller was satisfied long before Erskine was. He left the mirror and went out into the lounge.

"Dr. Miller, I presume?" said the woman softly.

"The same."

She wore exactly what she might have worn on Earth, which on Venus meant she was disguised.

"I want to talk to you alone," she said.

"You can say what you have to say before Erskine."

She shook her head. "No. And I don't want her listening either. You know I'm not dangerous. She can wait outside the door if she likes. Then she can see I don't go until she knows you're safe."

Miller nodded to Erskine. She hesitated, but went outside without a word.

"Let's go out on the veranda," Charlotte suggested.

"Should I be that stupid? You could hold me there while someone got in a careful shot at me."

The woman shrugged. "All right. But we'll go into the bedroom, then. I don't want to be overheard."

Miller let her go first. She sat on the bed where she could see through the mirror that there was no one in the lounge.

"We don't want to kill you, Doctor," she said. "We only want to get rid of you. In a new civilization justice has to be quick and strong to keep the peace. If you were to die someone would pay for it and it might be me. So all I wanted to do earlier was to get you away and ship you back to Earth."

MILLER ran it round on his tongue and couldn't see anything wrong with it.

"You see, then I thought you'd come out here voluntarily. I thought we'd have to force you to go back. Then, of course, you could never get back here. The emigration people won't ship anybody twice."

That didn't sound so good. Miller couldn't see Charlotte's party trusting to red tape. And in any case, if he went to the authorities with his story, it shouldn't be impossible to prove it and have himself shipped back—if he wanted to. But he let that go.

"Then I found," Charlotte went on, "that you'd been brought here by force. That changed the whole thing. You *want* to go back to Earth, don't you? So we don't have to kidnap you to send you back."

That sounded all right again. But there was still that hiatus in the middle.

"You have your own ship?" he asked.

"No. But we can get you on a ship going back to Earth."

He believed that too.

"I like some of what you've told me," he admitted. "But I have to know one or two things before I trust you. For one thing, why shouldn't Erskine hear this?"

"She's a volunteer," Charlotte pointed out. "She doesn't want you to go back. She'd probably try to stop it."

Miller nodded. "Answer one more thing, and I'm on," he said. "Why? What are you working for?"

She crossed her legs and smiled at him.

It took him a few seconds to realize she was trying to make herself attractive. But women weren't magnets, with all men iron. He could have told her she was wasting her time.

"We know your record, Doctor," she said. "Well, here on Venus we're only doing something like what you did on Earth. So I think you'll understand all right. We didn't start the epidemic. It started by itself. But we found out something about it very quickly, while the doctors were still groping. We saw how we could use it. It's quite simple. We're making claims on the land that nobody wants now, under dozens of different names, and we're getting it. It's already developed, most of it. Undeveloped land is no use to us but the danger spots include some of the best sites on Venus."

She smiled at him again. "You see, I'm trusting you. Nobody outside our group knows this but you. And you can see it makes sense. We're leaving our land alone for the moment, naturally. But when we're ready we can take it over. A lot of the claims aren't through yet. We don't want you bursting in and clearing *jaune* from the planet. We'll do that ourselves. But not yet."

She paused, then went on casually, "You'll get a cut, of course. Say ten million dollars. It's worth that to have you out of the way. Just so that there's no misunderstanding, you know the alternative? If you won't leave Venus we have to kill you and take our chance."

There was a long silence. Then Miller smiled grimly. "Lord, what a record I must have," he murmured. "I never thought it was as bad as that. Get out, Charlotte. I'm going to crack this trouble and I think I can do it pretty soon."

For a moment she stared at him wildly. She had obviously thought he was on the point of accepting her offer. Then savagely she launched herself at him.

It was difficult to defend himself without hurting her, and Miller didn't like hurting women. But in the end he decided the rule would have to be suspended for a few moments, and having suspended it, he went through the lounge and called Erskine in. She came in anxiously and surveyed the limp form of the woman, half on the bed and half on the floor.

"It was a pity she got tough," said Miller regretfully. "I'm very grateful to her. What she told me will help a lot."

Charlotte began to stir. There was hate in her eyes as she looked at Miller, and Erskine said, "Shall I ring McDonald?"

"Not yet. It was part of the bargain that we let her go." He looked down at the woman. "Think you can walk?"

She could and did, casting one last white-hot glance at him. She didn't have to say it was war. Miller knew it without any formal declaration.

III

"I THINK it's time I saw a *jaune* case," said Miller.

"Think you can do anything?" McDonald asked eagerly.

"Let's see what it looks like first. I'm afraid I'll need some sort of guard. These people really mean to kill me. And that would be sad, especially as I think I'm not far off the answer."

They went in a closed car, he and Erskine and McDonald, to the main city hospital. Miller didn't like visiting patients surrounded by huge, tough men armed to the teeth, but it couldn't be helped. They made a strange party walking along the sterile corridors, the police trying to go quietly but not exactly succeeding.

"We don't need any special precautions," said McDonald. "People *have* contracted the disease purely by infection, but you have to give the germ or virus or whatever it is more of a chance than we will."

He pushed open the door of a ward. Miller motioned his guard to stay outside. They were uneasy, but they stayed. Erskine, in her nurse's uniform, went with him.

The man on the bed was so yellow he looked as if his skin had been painted. Jaundice would have been the name for the disease if it had not been used already for an illness that had far less of yellow about it. The man lay with his eyes closed and hardly breathed.

"It's so painful," McDonald whispered, "that we have to keep them under all the time." He motioned Miller to the next bed where a man whose skin was also yellow, but not nearly so deep, was tossing in delirium.

"We think he's going to get better," he

said. "He was one of the nurses who went into the last plague-spot to bring people out. We can't give him morphia or it might stop his recovery."

"If that's a man recovering," said Miller softly, "the disease is the nastiest thing I've ever seen." He examined the man briefly, and others in the ward. The yellow pigmentation, he had already read in the reports, came from a slightly altered metabolism that came with the disease.

"Do you want to see some of the women?" McDonald asked.

"I suppose I must. You tested the air in all cases I suppose?"

"Yes—most extensively. Absolutely pure, as far as we can tell. If there's anything dangerous in it, it doesn't react to any test we know. More than that, when we break it down, there's nothing left unaccounted for. Two of the inert gases you find in Earth's atmosphere are missing but we don't think it makes the slightest difference."

Even Erskine, with five years' experience as a nurse, was sick before they left the wards. It wasn't the hideousness of the disease that was so shocking, for the patients' skin, apart from that strange yellow paint, was clear and firm. It was the terrible originality of the disease—the yellow sweat, the purple vomit, the green urine, the black boils.

"A very colorful disease," commented Miller bitterly. "You might have called it spectritis."

When they were out in the passage again, Miller said, "Can I have a laboratory to try a few things, McDonald? I'd like Erskine's help, but I don't think I'll need anyone else. One other thing—you have a few animals from Earth here. Are they affected by the disease?"

"Exactly the same way."

Miller looked at him strangely. He looked so long that at last McDonald burst out, "What's wrong? Have I started going yellow?"

"Not yellow. McDonald, why haven't you cracked this?"

McDonald tried to speak but couldn't, choked by puzzlement and anger.

"Maybe," murmured Miller, "it was because you were born on Venus."

McDonald's tongue unfroze. "That's what we thought," he said eagerly. "We

hoped a man like you, straight from Earth, might see something we'd missed."

"Yes," muttered Miller, "but I didn't think it would be a mile high."

IV

FOR days Miller and Erskine worked together. When he thought of anything but his work, it was about Erskine. It amazed him how much she could take. When he worked hard he was feverish and impatient.

Normally rather lazy, when he got his teeth into something he grudged the five hours' sleep he had to take. And his mood was ugly. He would be emotionless for hours and then he would curse and kick things and throw them about. But the only feeling Erskine showed in all that time was sympathy.

"I don't know why you should do it," he said once. "I don't have to be like this. It doesn't improve my work. I never actually worked with a woman before, and I don't think I ought to do it again. But we must finish this together. Already you know more about *jaune* than any of the Venusian doctors."

"You don't have to apologize," she said tiredly. "You're very nearly a great man, Rod. People have always put up with a lot from great men. Besides, I admire you after this more than I ever did."

"Admire me?" he exclaimed. "I thought this would have finished all that. You mean because I work hard?"

"No, anyone can work hard. But when something won't go right and you behave like a child and say filthy things to me, I know why it is. It's not because things aren't going well for you and something you thought was right turns out to be wrong. It's because you're the most honest experimenter I ever heard of. You do a thing that isn't going to lead anywhere, and you know it, because you know it ought to be done. You go all through it calmly, but then when it's done and it hasn't led anywhere, you swear and throw things."

"I won't do it any more," he promised.

She smiled wryly, for it wasn't the first time he had promised the same thing. She admired him as a scientist, but it was a shock to find that it was really the man she

liked—the successful doctor, about whom she had heard so many unpleasant things.

At last she said to him one day, "Well, that's the end at last."

He stared at her. "What do you mean, the end?" he demanded angrily. "We've a lot to do yet."

"What, checking? There's a world dying. Four hundred new cases this week. We haven't time to check everything to make sure we're absolutely right."

For a moment he ceased to be the scientist and became the successful doctor again, the man who could smile easily and whose voice was gentle.

"There may be a world dying, Erskine," he said, "but we want to make sure we're not helping to kill it."

That night someone got a bomb into the laboratory. There was no damage—only work set back a few days. So the only people who suffered were Erskine and Miller, who had to go through those extra days of toil and bitterness, and the few hundred people who died during the delay.

But at last it was really over, and for the first time in nearly three weeks Miller summoned his guard and was escorted to McDonald's apartment. There he changed and cleaned up, and Erskine got into slacks and a shirt, and when she met him in the lounge she knew that the scientist in him was asleep for the time being. And she couldn't help being glad.

There were two others present—Morgan, the police chief, and Henderson, head of the Laboratories. Miller knew Morgan didn't expect the *jaune* menace ever to be combatted. Fatalistically, he was living out what he thought were his last few years on Venus, expecting that in the end the planet would be as dead as before the first Earth ship arrived. Henderson said so little that no one knew what his point of view was, or even that he had one.

Miller didn't waste any time. "Jaune needn't trouble anyone after the end of this week," he said. "I can't do anything for those who already have the disease, or those who contract it in the next few days. But I can practically guarantee that there will be no new cases after that time."

The reception he got was curious. Erskine, of course, knew what he was going to say. McDonald had half-expected

it, and looked merely relieved and happy. Henderson was incredulous, but in his incredulity there were the seeds of belief—seen in contrast to Morgan, who merely smiled wearily, certain Miller was wrong.

"From the moment I arrived here," Miller went on, "it was pretty obvious that there was nothing very difficult in the problem of *jaune* itself. The strange thing was why none of you had been able to deal with it. Then I began to see what was involved, and began to understand.

"Jaune is entirely a product of the weed called new ivy," he said.

HE WAS not surprised when Morgan jumped to his feet. Henderson looked uneasy and even McDonald frowned.

"Sit down, please, Mr. Morgan. You're all intelligent men. You know you're going to listen to me and believe what you have to believe.

"You're all middle-aged," he said. "Not old, but all old enough to remember very vividly a life in which even new-born babies wore masks. You grew up knowing that to take off your masks, except in an air-tight, mechanically ventilated room, meant death. It didn't bother you very much because you had no experience of anything else. It bothered the newer colonists, just out from Earth, but habit forms quickly and soon they were almost as much used to their masks as you were.

"It was a new psychological factor, do you understand? At the formative part of your childhood you knew always at the back of your mind that your mask was more important than eating or drinking or sleeping for you could live a long time without food or drink or sleep, but not for five minutes without your mask.

"Then new ivy, a fourth mutation of Earth's ivy, was discovered and after a few years you could put aside your masks. You were all suspicious. It was so deeply ingrained in you that going out in the open without a mask was death that you were really terrified for a while. But even the people who still insisted on wearing their masks became careless after a while and soon there were no masks to be seen anywhere. And the new ivy didn't let you down.

"It was like being blind since childhood

and then suddenly seeing for the first time. No, I'm not over-estimating the inconvenience of wearing oxygen equipment. It was more than inconvenience. It was always a danger. People could easily fall, snap their airlines or break the glass. So when the danger was over you and thousands of others unconsciously apotheosized new ivy.

"So naturally enough, when this new thing came up, you, the older people who remembered the days when everyone had to wear a mask to breathe on Venus, refused to think of new ivy. There was no particular reason why you should. It had been tested in every possible way thirty years before. But the fact remains—if you hadn't still felt that dependence on the weed, if you hadn't felt almost human gratitude towards it, you would have discovered it had mutated again, so subtly that the air it modified reacted the same way to chemical analysis, but produced *jaune*."

"But even if you're right," McDonald exclaimed, "what are we to do? Go back to wearing masks?"

"You don't have to. The atmosphere is right now—except for those danger spots. Your chemical plant couldn't *make* your atmosphere—the new ivy had to do that. But now the chemical plant can control it. It's a small job. You don't need the new ivy. It was evolved to turn poison into a particular oxygen-nitrogen mixture. It was perfect for that. But when there was no poison left, what could it do? It had to live on the new atmosphere and throw off something else.

"All we have to do is destroy every scrap of new ivy on the planet. You'd have seen that long ago, only the whole planet, or almost the whole planet, was in the grip of a neurosis that linked new ivy directly with the well-being of Venus."

"You've proved this?" asked Morgan.

Miller nodded. It wasn't difficult. Not really, though we had some bad times while we were working on it. You see, we had to try everything else that might contribute too. All wasted time. *Jaune* is the product of nothing but new ivy."

"Just a minute," said Morgan. "This faction that we've been guarding you against. Do they know this?"

"Yes, they saw it at once—as you should have done. But why they saw it was simple.

They're young—I think you'll find everyone in the group is thirty or under. So they didn't have your neurosis. New ivy was only an unattractive weed to them. They realized, of course, when I arrived, that I wouldn't take long to find out what they had already discovered."

It wasn't as easy as that. You can't shake off a neurosis simply by explaining it. People with claustrophobia know the walls aren't going to fold in on them. People with a morbid fear of spiders know there's nothing to prevent them calmly crushing spiders between finger and thumb, or letting them run harmlessly over their bodies.

But gradually Miller, with Erskine's help, changed the attitude of the three men to whom a prolific, ugly weed was more than any mascot had ever been before. They couldn't personally destroy new ivy. But they would let others do it—others to whom it was only a plant.

V

THEY had flamethrowers and a weed-killer Miller had prepared, because Henderson couldn't bring himself to do it. They wore masks, and they were all young, not one of them over thirty except Miller.

The big patches of new ivy were all near the small towns. Virile as the weed was, it had one strange weakness, it could not be moved. It was not remotely like its ancestor except in its color. It was a ground plant that could not climb. It spread fiercely, but all on the ground. That made it easier to kill.

They had been at the same job for days now, doing nothing but burn and uproot and cut up the thick, dark green weed, hundreds of square miles of it. It required no special ability. There was no reason why Miller should be there and even less reason for Erskine to go along. But they had nothing else to do and they wanted to see the job through.

They were not the only party. There were hundreds of them, drawn from the young Venusians and the new colonists, destroying all the new ivy on the planet. It was anticlimax, Miller thought, after the trouble that had been taken to bring him here and the dark threats of Charlotte and her party. Nothing of them had been heard since the

woman who called herself Charlotte had stumbled from McDonald's apartment in Lexport.

The police had been working on it but they had found nothing. All transfers of jaune-affected land had been suspended but the men in whose names the claims had been filed had disappeared anyway. It was easy on Venus. New towns were springing up everywhere. Anyone who wished to disappear could lose himself effectively in the constant shifting of the planet's ever-growing population.

Erskine and Miller watched the men with the flamethrowers trying to ignite the new ivy field. It was no easy job. The weed grew in a tangle four feet high, almost choking itself in its virility. Its fat leaves and vines were heavy with moisture. It would burn in the end, but only after it had been seared again and again, and it was no use starting a fire at one point.

This field stretched for miles between two hills for it had needed a lot of new ivy to transform a whole planet's atmosphere in less than twenty years. The only way to burn such a field was to set fire to it at a dozen points, never letting any outbreak burn itself out, and keep at it patiently until at last the flames began to spread in the light breeze.

Burning was the only really effective way. The weed fought chemical preparations, mutating rapidly to thrive on them. And bombs dropped on new ivy fields only cut holes that were as thick as the rest in a matter of days.

"No wonder they never cleared it before," Erskine murmured. "Even if it hadn't been for the superstition about new ivy, I think it would have been left long after there was any use for it. You don't give yourself a job like this for nothing."

Jaune struck through the lungs, they had learned. There was no danger in mere physical contact with jaune-infected air, or even new ivy itself. So while everyone in the party wore a mask and carried compressed-air cylinders on his back, most of them were naked but for shorts. The risk of burns from flying sparks was nothing to the discomfort of working in boiling heat in an asbestos suit.

The women, and there were nearly as many girls as men in the party, mostly wore

only shorts too. Venus was very young and quite unselfconscious. But Erskine was just out from Earth. She had laughed easily at Miller's amused remarks on the subject, and it didn't bother her that the other girls were all but naked. But she wore a white shirt and meant to go on wearing it.

MILLER swept the scene with his eyes and suddenly pointed. "Look!" he exclaimed. "Did you see anything?"

"No, what?"

There was nothing to be seen now. But Miller remembered there was still a faction on Venus which had threatened to kill him. His men were spread out over a wide area. He began to call them together over the communicating system, even if it meant letting carefully kindled fires burn themselves out.

The movement he had seen was deep in the grain fields that bordered the new ivy jungle, with a hundred-yard strip of dead ground between them to keep the weed from getting at the grain. He thought that if there really were men hiding there then the loss of their advantage caused by Miller's men coming together might make them show themselves abruptly.

He was right. A small army had been creeping through the fields—at least two hundred, he estimated, as suddenly they stood erect and charged, all efforts at concealment gone. They were only about a quarter of a mile away.

"Back to the trucks!" Miller shouted. As he raised his voice the barrage started. But both forces were running, and the aim was erratic.

"Never mind shooting back!" Miller said, the two-way radio thrown open to carry his voice to every member of the party. "We'll only be out in the open longer."

He and Erskine had not been far from the twelve great trucks that had brought them and their equipment. As they reached them at a run, Miller spoke again, "Brown, get out a call to Morgan."

"It's on the air," came Brown's voice. "No reply yet. Wait—it's coming now." A pause, then—"They'll be here in less than an hour."

A lot could happen in an hour, Miller thought, with two hundred against less than

fifty, a good part of whom were women. It was a suicide attack, of course. Charlotte's men would never get away, unless it was all over very quickly. But they had every chance to wipe out Miller's whole party first.

"It's my fault," he said to Erskine through the mask, the radio off. "Though that's not much satisfaction to anyone. We had big guards at first, but of course they waited until we began to get careless. I couldn't always be surrounded by an army. If I were a really noble character I'd give myself up for, of course, they only want me. That would save the rest of you."

"Don't be a fool," retorted Erskine, her voice coming sharply even through the mask. "We'll beat them off."

"I doubt it. But anyway, I'm not noble enough for that. And there's always the possibility that even then they'd come after you too. They don't exactly love you either."

Everyone was in the shelter of the trucks now. There was a whine, and the truck behind which Miller and Erskine were sheltering settled into the soil as the air hissed from a front tire. Miller's party fired in reply. Soon the skirmish was a battle. The fire from the trucks was so concentrated that the men in the grain fields had to drop and crawl or be mown down.

The attackers were better armed since they had been expecting a fight and Miller had not. The one thing to redress the balance was the heavy flamethrowers that could be turned against the enemy, and the shelter of the trucks, such as it was.

IT WAS a mad, savage scene. Smoke covered everything, smoke from the burning ivy, the fumes of the flamethrowers, the little puffs from the guns and the crossed lances of the short-range ray weapons. Bombs were thrown, but the distance was still too great to make them effective. The attackers came on and on. Someone realized there was some acid weedkiller in the trucks and started shooting canisters of it from the bazookas. One of Miller's men got in a truck and sent it roaring towards the enemy, breaking the lines, crushing men under huge wheels, wreaking havoc until someone got an explosive shot into the engine. Then, through a momentary break in the smoke pall, they saw the driver pulled from his

cabin and struck to the ground.

Miller had thought that the large proportion of women in his force was a disadvantage, but they fought more savagely than the men. There was no command. Miller could shout orders but what was there to say?

Still there was a long way between the two forces. Those who were nearest had been picked off from the outset. But Miller hadn't a force of fifty now. His men, with the flamethrowers and the bazookas and the protection of the trucks, were selling their lives at the rate of one to three. But it wasn't enough. Not against explosive bullets that could tear through a truck and still kill a man on the other side. The enemy was spreading out, crawling through the new ivy as well as the grain fields. The trucks, poor shelter at best, were now almost useless.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the tide turned. The field of ivy at last caught and blazed furiously instead of smoldering damply. A little thing can change the whole issue in a battle, even a small battle. The enemy had to run from the blaze, cover or no cover. The men and women behind the trucks shot coolly, effectively. And in a moment the whole balance shifted.

In a last desperate rally the attackers rose to their feet and tried to storm the trucks. But there were too few of them. One by one they went down.

It had been a near thing. When it was over Miller counted his force and found five men and four women besides himself and Erskine. Only one was entirely unharmed. Erskine had a bullet through her arm and Miller himself had been hit twice.

They went among their friends and found that several more were alive. There must be many of the attackers still alive too, but they could wait. It would be half an hour yet before reinforcements could arrive from Lexpert.

"It was crazy," murmured Miller as he and Erskine worked with the wounded. Some of the others knew first aid, but he was the only doctor and Erskine the only nurse. "Why did they fight? It was a last desperate throw. It looks as if two hundred was all they could raise. Why didn't they use them fighting us with the ivy itself? They could have planted it faster than we could destroy it. Not half of Venus is even

explored. They could have used planes, dropping seed over the whole world. Why did they throw away their lives trying to kill me?"

"I think they were right," said Erskine. "In their own way, working for their own ends, they chose the right thing. They knew that you would beat them, whatever they did. You were the one man they really had to fear. They knew if they could get rid of you and get away, some of them, they might still have a chance. But that had to come first."

There was little they could do. Miller had no instruments, only bandages and iodine. He could only assist Erskine in what was really more her job than his. He didn't dress her arm until the last. He had wanted to, but he knew what she would have said. It was like the old tradition of a captain being the last to leave his ship. Her wound had to wait and his were last of all.

"Look," he said. Lying between the burning new ivy and the grain field, only twenty-five yards away, was the last of the enemy to fall, the one that had got nearest. The long hair showed it was a woman. Miller moved to go out to her.

Erskine pulled him back.

"It would be insane," she told him. "Suppose it is Charlotte. She was ready to die to kill you. Maybe she's waiting there until you go out, until she knows she can't miss."

"She's on her face," said Miller. "Whenever she moved we could shoot. Let's have a look."

It was Charlotte but she was quite dead.

Miller stared down at her. "The funny thing is," he said slowly, "she was exactly the kind of woman I used to deal with on Earth. Beautiful, hard, powerful, ambitious, sure she could buy anything whether it was an empire or a twenty-four inch waist. She thought she could buy me. Perhaps, on Earth, she could."

Erskine said nothing. It was not Charlotte she was looking at, but Miller.

VI

MILLER and Erskine were waiting for McDonald on the veranda. Nothing seemed to have changed since they stood there two months ago except that Erskine's

arm was in a sling and she wore shorts and was becoming golden-brown. Miller wore only his pants and the left side of him was swathed in bandages.

Well, perhaps quite a few things had changed, Miller thought, but in essence they were the two who had stood there, at a crossroads, and now they were at another crossroads. The menace of *jaune* was over. Miller had done his job—and now what?

"If they let me go back," said Miller abruptly, "will you come with me, Erskine?"

Startled, she sat up in her deskchair. "If they let you . . ." she began, her voice trailing away.

"I was brought here by force. I'm not complaining. Perhaps I was to blame for making force necessary. Romantically, I suppose, I should stay on Venus as the frontier doctor, with my own college of physicians, but I never was a truly romantic character. I'd better go back. I've made my bed on Earth and I might as well go back and lie on it."

"Do you really mean . . . ?" said Erskine.

"I mean I think I've done enough for Venus for them to do a little thing for me. I know I signed some fool declaration that I'd never go back, but someone was holding a gun on me. McDonald and the others know that."

"You were rushed through the emigration center," said Erskine quietly. "If you hadn't been, you'd have been told what all colonists are told. I never thought I'd have to tell you what they told me. I thought you knew. No, don't interrupt."

"You know how the spaceships work? They tell you about that. I don't pretend to understand it but I can remember some of what I was told. When you're immobilized by that drug a force field is set up in the ship. It takes the atoms in your body and starts—well, spinning them. Something happens to you like—like when water boils. Your state isn't altered as radically as that, but it's a great change. Your body is itself made a field of force."

"Then every atom in the ship—the ship itself, the engines, the people in it—are set on a point. By this time the ship is clear of the atmosphere. All that energy is released. As individual atoms you shoot off at anything up to half the speed of light. Your body is no longer a unit. But every atom

goes at the same speed, in the same direction, so you don't break up."

"Say what you're trying to say," Miller exclaimed. "Don't work through the whole case history."

"Just off Venus," the girl went on inexorably, "the process is stopped. Or rather, thrown into neutral. The laws of inertia don't operate. Each atom, instead of flying on, expends its energy—and colossal energy it is—in spinning. Very like what it was doing before you left Earth. The motion doesn't really stop abruptly, but very gradually. You and I, Rod, are still slowing down after the sixty thousand or so miles a second we were doing a month ago. We'll go on slowing down until we die but we'll never notice it. Not unless we try the same process again."

"YOU mean I can never go back to Earth," said Miller. "But people have done it. Not many, but I've heard of people . . ."

"In special circumstances," Erskine said. "Circumstances that can't ever apply to you or me. You see, when the atoms in your body are first set spinning, it's done evenly. It has to be, or some of you would arrive at Venus before the rest of you. And when you stop at Venus, the motion is still even. You could go straight back there and then—as the ships do. But at once there starts to be a change. Some atoms slow down quickly, some go on spinning. Unless it's kept even somehow, as the mater in the ships is kept even, you can never go back. For if you tried now, some of the atoms in your body would have much more energy than others and—well, when everything was released towards Earth you can guess what would

happen."

"Then when Charlotte offered to send me back to Earth . . ." murmured Miller.

"When she what?"

"I thought I was being noble and self-sacrificing not accepting the offer. For I trusted her in that, at least. But does nobody on Earth know this? I never heard of it."

"Nor I. It's known, of course, that people who go to Venus never come back but not that they *can't* come back. I suppose they're afraid that it would trouble people if they knew. That people wouldn't let brothers, sisters, sons and daughters leave Earth if they knew that they could never see them again. And, of course, for years scientists have been looking for other forms of space travel. They might come up with them any time."

"But in fifty years," said Miller, "they haven't."

"Prospective colonists are told about it. Then they can stay behind if they like, but they must keep the secret. It didn't matter to me. But you . . ."

"Oh, well," Miller murmured. "So I stay on Venus."

"Do you really mind?" asked Erskine with transparent disinterest.

He smiled. "No, I don't really mind. But then, I was always able not to want what I couldn't get."

"Is the corollary true too?" she asked casually. "I mean, can you decide to want what you can get?"

Miller looked at her quizzically.

"I don't suppose you could decide to want me?" she murmured unsteadily.

Slowly, gently, Miller took her hand in his. "You're quite wrong," he told her. "You don't know how wrong."

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SPACEMEN ARE BORN

By BOLLING BRANHAM

Everyone knows that spacemen are born—not made. But grav-bound Trase Barnes, No. 1 v. p. of Air-Lines, Inc., bet his arrogant soul that he could shoot Saturn's rings—and live.

*"O, Jewel of the Eastern Sky,
O, Mother of many things,
Bring home your sons to safety,
From the Stars to Saturn's
rings. . . ."*

CURSE IT, I AM TOO OLD TO GO to space, and why can't I be content with that?
Must I hear the spacemen's songs and the

stories they tell, so that the breath of romance aches each day in my bones? For here on Earth's cool moon I am as close to the sky as I need be, and the sky is close enough to me.

But those spacemen who go to Saturn—ah, they have viewed a scene that exists nowhere else in all our universe, and I think they delight in singing the Saturn "Home Song" in my ears and telling me



of the wonders of Saturn's skies.

For have you ever been to Saturn? No, you needn't go away, for in a moment I'm going to tell the story of Trase Barnes. But in order to understand him you've got to know about Saturn.

For, you see, you're coasting when you come in, riding with idling jets, cutting in under the edge of the outside ring, into the darkness away from the sun. On the fourth day you go between the big ring and the crape, and then, when you look above you—you see one magnificent reason why men go to space.

There's Saturn.

The God of Time, he is, and you're looking out over the flatness of the rings at the yellow bulk of a planet, filling your sky ahead. Yellow, streaked with purple streamers, fading away at the edges into the blackness that is eternal space. Yes, fortunes have been made and lost on trips to Saturn, but no one loses the memory of how it looks when you shoot the rings.

Now about Trase Barnes . . .

Trase was born here on the Moon, right in the dispatcher's station, with the pull of artificial gravity helping to push the blood around for the first time in his little squalling body.

You know what gravity does for you? Of course, it's the reason that today spacemen are a special breed. Back when every country was racing to get the first rocket on the moon no one thought much about gravity except how to nullify it.

But when the first men got out in space on the way to the moon, they couldn't think much of gravity except how to get back to it. They didn't get back, nor did the men on the next trip, nor the next sixteen brave crews that darted off into the night sky with the howling fire coming out below them. It was number 19 before they found the trouble, for aboard it was the first crew member with spacemen's ear—and don't we know now that spacemen are born?

Maybe you know they're born and not made, and maybe you don't know why. I'll tell you then, cause my story isn't right without it.

BACK when I was kid in Tennessee, I used to raise a thousand chickens every spring and never lost but a few. But there

was one chicken one year that I'll remember for the rest of my days. He never was able to walk. From the time he was hatched he kept falling on his face, or his behind, and rolling over and over, with the other chickens walking on him. So one day I asked the Doc what was wrong.

"No equilibrium," said the Doc, and *now* you know what that means! Right inside his ear the canals were messed up, the canals where the liquid rolls around, and this chicken didn't know which way was up. Seems like he didn't have any liquid in there. No liquid at all.

Well, that's what makes a spaceman. A man with a normal ear, why he knows which way is up or down, because the gravity pulls that liquid around in there, and it rolls over those sensory hairs which contact the brain with the latest information. But when the first spacemen got out into space, there wasn't any gravity to pull the liquid, and it charged around in there whichever way it felt like—up, down, sideways, whichever way they moved their heads, and the walls, sky, and world just whirled around. They all got sick; couldn't see, couldn't eat, couldn't move. Most of the first rockets just passed right on by the moon and went out into space, and those that didn't just piled into it head on, with half-dead men lying at the controls.

But in number 19 there was a man who'd always had trouble with his sense of balance, a man who fell easily and hit hard when he went down. That man saved his crew. For when they got out in space they got sick, like the other eighteen crews, but the other man, he just heaved a sigh of relief, just looked out at the sky and the stars and the great big universe of space, and his whole insides cried, "This is for me!"

Yes sir, he was a spaceman-born—the first spaceman—and he brought that ship back by himself to tell the world that spacemen are born.

It was a funny thing too. For so many of the born spacemen are weaklings, kids who never feel sure of themselves, who never can play hard games because they're always falling down. Other kids always made fun of them, but now these men came into their own. They weren't at home on the earth, the moon, Mars, or *any* planet—their

home was the deep purple nothingness of space.

And they built our space colonies and have always run our space-lanes.

But Trase Barnes wasn't one of them.

Like I say, Trase's father was a spaceman, a long thin giant of a man who loved the sky and lived in it. Trase's mother was like his father, a space-woman born, and they lived out there at No-Grav City, hung there fifty thousand miles away from the moon, where spacemen live without the heavy bonds of gravity.

But Mrs. Barnes came into the Moon-Station hospital to have her baby, and naturally she hoped for a son—a spaceman-born. But Trase was just as sound and healthy as an Iowa pig in October, and he knew from the beginning which way was up and down. But how he hated it!

When Trase's pa came back from a long haul out to Pluto—he'd been gone a year and a half—and found out that Trase would never be a spaceman, he broke into tears. Only time he ever cried.

Well, they lived with him and they raised him, here in the gravity of the moon. His pa had to make a living, hitching space hulks back and forth in the dark of the sky, but his ma was as kind as ever; she just gritted her teeth and stayed in the gravity with him till he got out of Moon-Station prep school. They finally had another child, a girl, who was a space-woman born. Now she's woman pilot on a Mercury to Venus run.

OH, HOW Trase hated himself, and the world, and most of all the gravity that bound his feet to the ground. His first wanderings were out there to the space-port, where the spacemen in their gray uniforms strolled easily about and swaggered before his eyes. There were the mysterious vessels, crouched in their launching racks, their skins shiny with the flow-sheen imparted to them by tremendous speeds out in nothing. There were the gatherings of spacemen to talk about the black, black side of Mercury, the pale corona of the sun seen from Neptune, the thousands of square miles of flat green moss on Venus, but mostly they talked of the purple and yellow rings of Saturn, and the deep-breath feeling of space.

So Trase would go back to his school books and try to understand arithmetic and geography, and his body would always be on time, his physical being would say "present"—but his mind, ah, his mind wandered a golden pathway among the glittering worlds of the sky.

His little fingers were deft and quick, and by the time he was ten he had made a dozen space-models. There was a model of old number 19, crude, rough, and laughable, with its huge stepped rockets that were dropped away to the rear on the way to the moon. There beside his schoolbooks was the *Adventurer II*, first ship to go inside Mercury's orbit and come back to tell the tale. His walls were lined with pictures of such men as Rak Bartel, the laughing spaceman who rescued the Wofford expedition from the wilds of Titan, and over there was Colombo Dante, the pale little Indian half-breed who held ten speed records around the solar system that are still unbeaten today.

But under his pillow was the picture of Mortan Barnes, his father, whose huge, thin face gave the appearance of looking wistfully at the stars. Yet, it couldn't have been more wistful than the eyes of Trase.

So Trase went on with his growing up, and they told him to study medicine, so he gobbled up his chemistry, his biology, and anthropology, but he studied space-math at night. By the time he got out of prep-school he could work some astro-nav problems in his head and knew the names, tonnages, and horsepower of the seven hundred models of space vessels without so much as cracking a book.

He read a story about a stowaway one day, and then he read it again. It made his mind start to working and he began to say to himself, "Maybe they're wrong about my ears. Maybe I would be a good spaceman. If a man's got a mind to be a spaceman, looks like he ought to be able to make himself do it, doesn't it?"

The space-station doctor spoke sympathetically. "No, Trase, there's very little that can be done. An operation, maybe—but the only doctor I know capable of performing such an operation is on Earth, and it would cost thousands of dollars. No, Trase, be happy, can't you? Most spacemen are not really happy. I think they really

envy us gravity-bound people, for they can't ever know a real home. Can't you see the wistfulness in their faces and the haunted look deep back in their eyes?"

Yes, Trase could see all that, but to him it was because they saw things that no other man could see.

Trase didn't believe the doctor. He had to try it, so he smuggled himself into an air-lock one day, grabbed an air-suit, and wandered out on the ground of the moon.

Now the moon's got a little gravity, you know, but when Trase got out of the artificial gravity of the Moon-Station, he began to run into trouble. It was all right as long as he stood still, because the little gravity of the moon would pull at the liquid in his ears. But if he moved suddenly, why it would shake all around in there, and the moon and the stars and the bright big Earth over there would whirl in a blaze of light. Then Trase would wake up lying on his face with his suit messed up from being sick.

So Trase figured out a method of training himself. "I'll show 'em," he would groan through clenched teeth while the sky wheeled around his head. "By the Great Big Bear I'll show 'em that a spaceman *can* be made!"

HIS private method of training was to move in exaggerated slow motion. To walk out on the rough ground of the moon and lift one foot so-o-o slowly and carefully, with his eyes fixed on one tall, spiky peak of the Appenines, and with the crust of Mare Imbrium staying in place. He got where he could cover a mile or two in an earth-time afternoon, never taking his eyes off the fix on the mountain peak, never moving his head to catch a glimpse of the fiery trails of the space vessels roaring off into the purple-blue sky.

And the magic catch-phrase would come like a chant from between his twisted lips, "Spacemen are made . . . spacemen are made!"

He really made a little headway. He got where he could move a little faster and could occasionally take a quick glance upward at the cystalline patchwork of the sky.

And what was that beautiful point of light out there?

Trase knew it was Saturn, and his eyes

would be fixed upon it as a final mount of redemption, as the supreme goal of a well lived lifetime. He wheedled his way into the Moon-Station astrodome and hungrily gulped in the sight of the ringed planet canted there in the scope view-finder. It was there! The rings were there, the huge planet was there, but the scope only showed you enough to make it just out of your reach; tantalizing, torturing—a pearl to melt through your fingers when you reached for it.

"Hi'ya Saturn!" he would cry. "God of Time that you are, you've waited a long time for me but I'll be there!"

Trase began going to the dispatcher's station, getting the schedules of arrivals and departures and destinations, and figuring the orbits. Then he could tell the exact time the space vessels were due to shoot the rings at Saturn, or burst through the 1,100 mile space between the crape ring and the middle one. Then he would be sitting there at the scope, imagining that he could see a ship—a so-small fleck of blackness skimming across the yellow of the watery hulk of Saturn. That was the way he saw the blow-up of the *Andromeda*, carrying a load of fissionable materials, when she burst in a flash of white-hot energy in a collision with some hunks of jet in the middle ring.

After he saw that, Trase walked home with something dead inside of him, with his head quiet, his shoulders drooping, his heart sobbing out the Saturn "Home Song" as he had heard his father sing it so often. For his father had been master of the *Andromeda*.

Trase was the one who had to tell his mother, and she took it, dry-eyed, for the first few minutes. But then she could stand it no longer, and she flung herself at her tall son, lean and muscular, and sobbed, "I'm glad you can't be a spaceman. I'm glad, I'm glad. It's a dirty life, and your reward is a flashing death in a fire-pit."

Trase held her while she sobbed out her grief. He had to keep swallowing down the lump in his own throat, but he could somehow keep seeing that white hot burst of flame framed before the God of Time, and could imagine that his father's spirit was freed in the space he had loved, out there where he could live on forever, gazing on that magnificent scene.

After that, there wasn't any more studying medicine for Trase. He had to go to work. Because of his aptness with figures he got a job in the dispatcher's office as assistant calculator. It paid well, but somehow it didn't mean so much any more, for Trase seemed to be living in an emptiness greater than that of space. He clocked in and clocked out each shift, and his error index was smaller than that of any other clerk in the office. The other clerks used to look at him and grunt, "There goes Trase Barnes—never a mistake. He's just as infallible as the machine."

So he went up. Assistant calculator to calculator, to assistant dispatcher to dispatcher. In seven years he was chief dispatcher and in three more he ran the Moon-Station spaceport. Twenty-nine years old, vice-president of Air-Lanes, Inc., owned a block of Marsopolis, Inc., stock, and had never been off the moon.

In later years, it kind of quit bothering him, except sometimes when some of his pilots came in to make a report and they'd seen a flashing meteor on Io, or had screamed through the blue, thin, upper atmosphere of Jupiter—and they simply could not hide their feelings in the language of official reports. At times like that, Trase would sometimes slip on the air-suit, go through his old routine out there on the forgotten dust of Mare Imbrium, and mutter his phrase about "Spacemen are made!"

But it was just a ritual, just an escape, just a way of breathing an occasional bit of life into an empty dream, and Trase knew it. Where was that feeling of yesterday, that lift in his breast, that catch in his throat, that wild calling from out there among the white stars that made his legs tremble, his heart hammer, and his spirit cry out, "I'll be there"?

Where, indeed, had the ghosts gone, those ghosts that fought so bitterly the mound-bound vision of himself, sitting at his desk and never leaving the moon?

TRASE had just come in from one of those visits one afternoon when Irinia Custer walked into his office unannounced, and caught him there in an unlighted office, staring out at the constellations low on the horizon.

Now, Irinia was almost a legend. Her

reaction time was the fastest of any pilot employed by Air-Lanes Inc. Her hardness and cynicism in the face of danger, death, and the accepted ideals of life made top story-telling material wherever spacemen gathered. She wouldn't have needed to be beautiful, but on top of it all she was; for her sensuous figure and black hair, with equally coal-black eyes, made her wild beauty as legendary as her deeds. Yet Trase Barnes was known to be twice as cold-blooded as she, an automaton who sent pilots into danger with nothing but money in mind.

So Irinia eased quietly into Trase's office that afternoon, and there the tough man sat, with his back to the door, staring out the huge lucite port into the jewelled splendor of the clear night sky—seeing the constellations that to Trase were as familiar as the walls of his office.

Irinia stood quietly behind him for a moment, then she spoke. "So the v.p. likes the stars," she breathed slowly, but her voice was not scornful. "The big, moon-bound executive, with ice-water in his veins, *has* got a spark of romance."

Trase turned to her slowly, a part of his mind still out there among the stars where strange kings and queens fought for galactic empires.

Irinia looked at him, at the expression on Trase's face, and then suddenly she could read the whole story written there in plain characters. Right there in his eyes she could see the soul of a spaceman penned up in a moon-bound cage.

And suddenly Irinia Custer felt sorry for the hardness that was in her spirit, sorry for her bitter, cynical attitude, sorry for the dirty, laughing nicknames she had fashioned among space-crews for vice-president Trase Barnes.

They looked at each other for a long time. Then Trase got out the thick words slowly. "Well, I'm stuck, Irinia," he smiled. "You know the way I feel—the secret's out, and I know you'll tell it."

Irinia started to talk, but something was lodged in her throat and her mouth felt dry, strangely dry. She walked over to Trase and her trembling hand reached out and touched the features of his face, and the fierceness of what she felt inside her made her whole body shake.

"Yes, I know, Trase," she breathed. "I know." Then suddenly she put her head on his shoulder and cried.

Well, that's the way it goes, you know. The two toughest people in spacing ran together, and it was like joining two ribbons of molten steel. It was a love such as the Moon-Station had seldom seen, and the talk ran through the space-lines like it had never gone before. It had been bound to happen to Trase, yet all the worlds wept for the two of them. Because everyone knew that nothing was worse than for a spaceman or woman to be mated with a ground-bounder.

At first their happiness was untouchably supreme, and Trase walked about in kind of warm haze, deliciously aware of things he had never before noticed—the pleasant coughing sound of a Moon-Dog barking, the tinny clatter of dishes that rang out from the Spacemen's Mess; all small things which never before had meaning, but which now made him seem like part of the world.

Yet, it caught up with them, for they both knew that Irinia couldn't give up space and Trase couldn't go to space. Or could he?

It got Trase to thinking. Hadn't there been something about a doctor, or an operation . . . maybe now he had the money to pay. He went back to see the space doctor who told him that, and found that he was dead. He asked other doctors and they told him that it was a bunch of foolishness, that they had never known of a successful operation of that type, that the only thing to remember was the phrase, "Spacemen are born—not made."

Trase got kind of tired of hearing it, but no doctor would risk his reputation on the operation.

So that was that.

TRASE and Irinia talked it over; that is, as much as they could with their throats kind of choked up, and they decided the only thing they could do was to forget each other. Irinia could never be happy living in gravity. So she went off to space again, and Trase just sat back at his great carved oaken desk, looked out his lucite port, and pondered.

Oh, that Trase was a thinker, and his thinking got faster and faster as the days

went by, and sometimes again he began to be seen on an earth-time afternoon down on the flight line, watching the ships come in and out. It was a place he hadn't frequented in years.

By the time Irinia got back on her trip from Deimos, his face was hard—hard as the thought that was in his mind. He called Irinia to come to his office. She didn't want to, because they had vowed never to speak again, but somehow, from the tone of the note, she had to come.

"O.K., veepee," she cracked, a frozen, bitter, mask of a smile on her lips, "What've I done now?"

Trase said, "I'm going to space."

Irinia's face went white for a minute, but she knew her Trase—and she knew argument was no good.

"Where?" she whispered.

"Saturn," Trase replied.

"Oh, no!" cried Irinia. "Not Saturn! It's the worst of them all."

"I know it is," Trase said. "That's the reason I want to go."

"You'll never come back alive," whispered Irinia. "If the sickness doesn't get you, the rings will."

"Maybeso, Irinia. But I need your help. I've got plans and I need you. If I make this trip, maybe I can make others. Maybe . . . maybe I can prove that spacemen *can* be made. But if I can't make it without sickness, I promise you I'll never bother you or ask anything of you again."

"But what are your plans, Trase?"

"Drugs, first, Irinia. Progressive slackening off, and attempted self-induced hypnotism. Small artificial gravity unity, enough to create about a tenth of earth gravity. I think I can do it, Irinia."

"But it's all been tried before, Trase, and it's never worked! You know that—it's deeply psychological as well as physical. You can't do it simply by wanting it!"

Trase looked long and hard at her. His smile was almost ghastly. "Life is worth nothing to me unless I try it, Irinia," he said quietly.

So that did it. Trase cashed in his stock in Air-Lanes, bought a ship and they went to work on it. He couldn't get a first-rate crew because the news got around about what they were trying to do, and no self-respecting spaceman would have anything

to do with it. But there were drifters to be had.

They blew off in the middle of the two-week moon night, the polyglot crew grazing the space-station dome, and setting off ten degrees off course, with Trase strapped in his bunk and drugged into unconsciousness, and Irinia cursing the crew in pure venom they had never heard before.

And that, essentially, was the way the trip went. Irinia never weakened and by the time they were two months out she had the crew almost to a state of discipline.

Of course, drugs had been tried before—they were the method used to transport non-space-born passengers between the Earth and the moon. Irinia fed Trase intravenously. At the end of the two months she turned on the puny artificial gravity system and let him come awake.

His first words were, "Where's Saturn?"

"O, Trase, we haven't even got well started yet," Irinia cried.

TRASE came awake. He tried to sit up in his bunk, and fell out lightly on the floor with his whole insides heaving. Irinia dosed him up again and toyed with the idea of turning back. But Trase was in good health, so she decided to go on. At the end of the third month, Trase found that he could lie flat on his back in his bunk with eyes blindfolded, and with no movement at all. This way he could stay awake at stated intervals, as long as there was no change in course or velocity.

Oh, the beauty of open space! Though he couldn't get out of his bunk to see it, Trase knew that they were way out in the middle of nowhere, and Irinia would come around to tell him about it.

The time passed, and then Saturn began gradually to fill the screen of the ship's vision-plate, and Irinia began to worry. For to shoot the rings required plenty of deft acceleration and deceleration, and Irinia knew that Trase couldn't stand the maneuvering.

"How about just a look at Saturn from a distance, Trase?" Irinia would ask.

"We've got to shoot the rings," he would reply grimly.

So Irinia knew he wouldn't be satisfied with anything less, and she went busily about the procedure of lining up the poly-

glot crew for the ring-shooting.

At fifty million miles from Saturn she fired two small braking blasts, and Trase cried out from his bunk and was sick again. She ran back to him and said, "Oh, Trase, let me drug you till we get there."

His white suffering face showed clenched teeth. He grabbed her arm and said, "I'll make it, Irinia, I'll make it. Just let me know when the view gets good."

So she let him alone and went about the business of braking. She heard no more groans from Trase. But when she went back to see him, there he would be with his hands gripped until the knuckles showed white, with the bedclothes gripped between his teeth. "I'll make it, Irinia," he would gasp. Then sometimes she would hear him cry, "I'll be there, God of Time, I'll be there!"

Space-sickness and nausea . . . Those it doesn't kill generally try to kill themselves.

Well, from fifty million miles it's a four-day trip to shoot the rings and get started away again, and there was Trase with the universe spinning around his ears, suffering as much as anyone can suffer.

They went in under the darkness of the huge outside ring, for the rings were canted at that time almost their total 28 degrees to the ecliptic.

And then out of the misery and the eons of suffering Trase suddenly heard a voice, "Trase! Trase! Come to the Astrodome, we're shooting the rings! Trase, we're shooting the rings!"

Trase prayed. His hands reached out for the bunk straps and he felt Irinia helping him. He had long ago lost everything on his stomach but the world whirled in a wild clanging clatter of craziness and he had to be guided along the passageway.

"I can't make it!" he cried at once, and Irinia had to drag him back to his feet, and then he said, "Yes, I can—I'll be there."

Well, that was the way Trase made it. His clothes reeking with his sickness, his body wasted away from inaction, his eyes dimmed and glazed over from suffering, his face a mask of thin ferocity from his determination. But he made it.

There's Saturn, Trase.

He looked out over the burning brilliant flatness of the crape ring to the huge yellow hulk of the God of Time towering over

him. The light and majesty of what he saw swam to his brain out of the fogs of bitterness that had shrouded his soul and he saw it—one magnificent reason why men go to space.

Personal Saturn, unreachable Saturn . . . yellow, streaked with purple streamers, fading away at the edges into the blackness that is eternal space. From there at the edge of the crape ring it is as though you were standing on a plain of golden dust, staring up into the face of destiny. The features of the face are plain, formed out of the whirling evanescent colors of the gases whipped around on the surface by cyclonic winds. You can see rainbows and pots of gold fashioned and then whipped away to change to greater things. The breath of eternal mystery blows on the spirit, and spacemen say you can see anything you desire.

The ship lurched this way and that as the jets kept it on its course, and Trase suddenly realized that the sickness had dropped away from him like a fetter. The ship headed back towards Titan for a refueling stop, but Trase sat there and stared at Saturn until the astrodome got around to the front and the jet trails obscured the view at the rear. He was not sick while he looked at Saturn.

His clear-headedness lasted about half-an-hour. Then Trase got sick again. He was sick for a day and a half, until the ship began to come in on Titan.

But the drifter crew had hid out some Mercurian liquor and got drunk before landing. They failed to cut the jets. Irinia cursed until the spaceship bulkheads turned red hot, but she fell and knocked herself out running down from the pilot's compartment to the engine-room. And so there was the ship headed wide-open into Titan with the crew drunk, Irinia unconscious, and Trase dead-sick in his bunk.

Well, you'll know now that Trase saved the day. He began to think of Saturn as he had seen it. He staggered down to the en-

gine-room, cut the jets, then ran up to the pilot's room where the rough surface of Titan stared him in the face. And he wasn't sick while he thought of Saturn.

The ship cracked up but nobody was killed. They hadn't been able to get any insurance with an unlicensed crew, so that left Trase flat-broke. He wasn't a veepee anymore since he had no stock in Air-Lanes, and Irinia got fired for taking the extended leave.

So things were kind of tough for a while, but . . . Where are they now? Oh, you know, you've heard all about it. They found a backer, and now they're out on Pluto with a space-drive job, getting ready to set out for Centauri. And Trase has never been sick again.

What does it prove?

Well, see those words written right there over the entrance to the spacemen's mess? Those are the words Trase used when they pulled him out of the wreck on Titan. I'll read them for you. "I've seen Saturn! And to you who have seen it, I don't need to say whether spacemen can be made. To others, to millions of youngsters who want to be spacemen, I'll say now that spacemen *are* born. But to each of them I'll say this—If you want to be a spaceman, you don't need a spaceman's ear, all you need is a spaceman's soul."

So the spacemen took that and added another verse to the Saturn "Home Song," and it's the one that really makes me hurt because I can't go to space again. Sometimes late at night I hear them singing it from far out on the field when a crew is coming in off a run, and that's when I know you can't stop them. You can't stop the born spacemen until they reach the stars. The verse goes like this:

*"Oh, Saturn, the God of Time,
May your majesty never fade.
For your beauty is final proof,
Spacemen are born not made."*



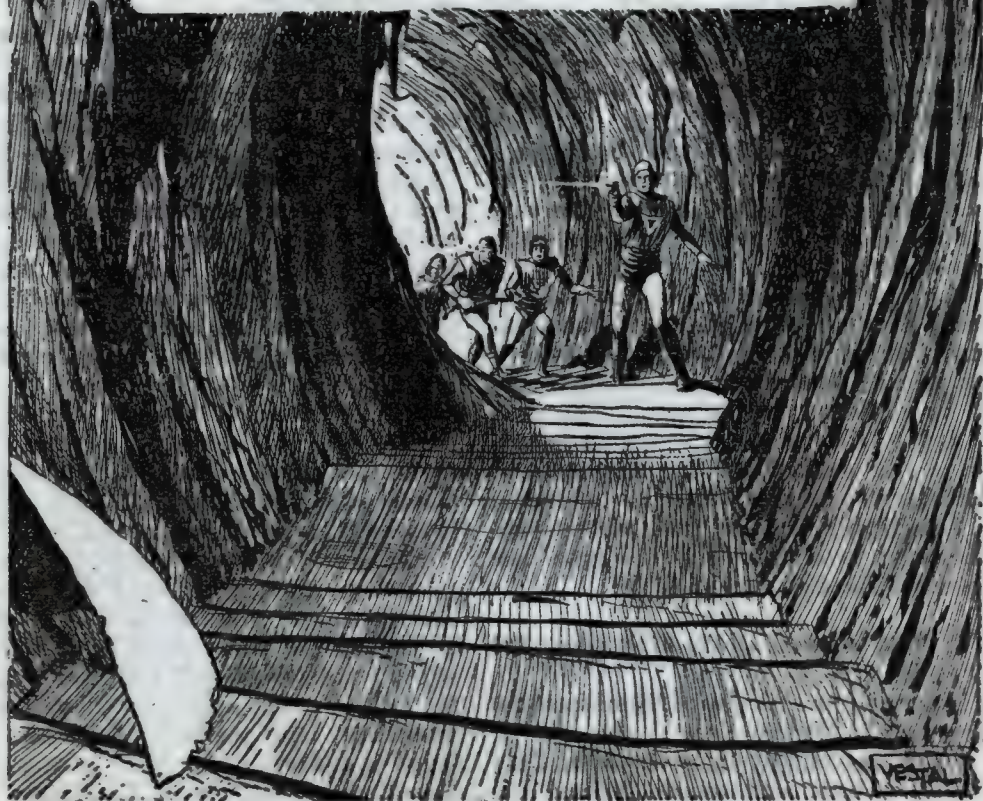
Prince Cadmus slew the Dragon and sowed its teeth. Could this latter-day Cadmus smash Akal-jor's atomic monster? Could he halt the devouring Gray God before—

Doomsday 257 A. G.!

Novelet by BRYCE WALTON

CADMUS trembled now as he waited. He had been waiting too long. Sweat was heavy on his clean-muscled body. A bright eagerness blazed from his gray eyes. And beyond the small pressure dome of the combination lab and living quarters, the frigid night pounded at the translucent teflonite—gnawed hungrily at that small dot of life and warmth on the barren asteroid.

Now that he was almost ready to step into the matter transmitter, each moment had become an eternity as he



waited to be transported almost instantly to Mars. To the city of Akal-jor. To his final destiny.

He cursed softly at the cloud of amnesia aching in his skull. Johlan the Venusian scientist had had him in various states of hypnosis for some time, educating him for this task, and had placed a protective veneering of amnesia across his mind to protect his purpose from the Silver Guard's mental probers in case he were captured.

Since birth, Johlan had raised Zaleel and Cadmus on the asteroid. The three of them were unconditionally dedicated to the great "plan." Because of his fogged memory, Cadmus now knew but little concerning the details of the plan. He only knew that he would die to carry it through. That if he failed, Tri-Planet civilization would go on down to final decay and ruin.

The three of them, three frail motes of intelligent life, must save the vast System. Old Johlan the Venusian. Zaleel of the golden hair and generous red lips. And Cadmus the fighter. To fight the Silver Guards, and the gigantic mechanical intelligence of the Great Gray God, Cadmus had only the sword at his side and the crude energy gun Johlan had made. The energy gun was too small for efficiency but it had to be small in order to be carried unnoticed beneath his tunic.

Zaleel was gone. She had stepped into the transmat months before to carry out her part of the plan. Cadmus remembered only the shiny richness of her hair, the warm promise of her lips.

A signal light blinked. A glow crackled round the electronic power rim of the transmat. Cadmus shot one last glance through the pressure dome where he had spent most of his lifetime in preparation.

A thin hard smile parted his space-burned face as he stepped into the transmat and melted into a blurred vortex of coloration.

Pain beyond thought shattered his consciousness to shreds. The blackness was absolute. The cold was ineffable.

IT WAS the year of the Gray God, 257 A. G.

Tomorrow was the day of Worship at the Gray God's shrine. Beyond the city of Akal-jor was the vast valley where the Gray God was born, and where it lived on,

eternally, beneath its impregnable gray metal dome, five miles in diameter, and a mile high. Shielded by half a mile of deadly radioactive field, a teeming moat of gamma rays through which no living thing could pass.

On three worlds, hopeless, futile, static beings of a dying civilization prepared for the big exodus to Mars and to the Gray God's altars. Then they would return to their dull cycle of meaningless existence to dream in some drugged escapeasy, or to die horribly in one of Consar III's atomic power plants, mine shafts, or his isotope factories. Consar III had arrived in Akal-jor for the worship. With him were five thousand slaves. Bathing in countless hedonistic luxuries, he awaited the worship to begin at tomorrow's dawn. Meanwhile he looked for new and interesting female slaves.

Next to sensual pleasure, Consar enjoyed most the contemplation of his great power over the masses of three worlds. He could never lose that power. Unless the Gray God died, and that was impossible of course. Or unless he died. He would die certainly, sometime. Then he wouldn't worry about pleasures or power.

From the windows of his Martian mansion, the Palace of Pearl, he looked to the east into the valley of the Gray God. It towered, a massive gray metal skull. Consar III laughed. The Gray God was a machine. Therefore its position as governmental dictator of the System remained absolutely stable. Nothing could ever change again. His position as sole exploiter of the resources of the System, under the title of Consar Exploitations Interplanetary, was to remain unchanged forever. It was a perfect setup.

The System was Consar's really, despite the fact that the Gray God ruled through mechanical dictates. All the dictates favored Consar. Consar and his hedonistic rituals, sycophants, courtiers and concubines.

There was always the rumor of an underground seeking to overthrow the status quo. The Cadmeans, who had tried once before to destroy the Great Machine, had been wiped out of existence. Or at least most of them. If any did remain alive, they were ineffectual. They would be discovered and killed or enslaved by the Silver Guards. The Guards didn't really work for Consar, not

directly. They were conditioned in the council tower to obey the dictates of the Great Machine. But those dictates all favored Consar's position of royalty, so it amounted to the same thing.

He moved the animated throne across the room to the edge of his roseate pleasure pool that shimmered in the middle of the jeweled floor. Above him, joylamps spun their songs of colored sensuality. His three hundred pounds of white flabby flesh settled into depths of luxuriance.

A small spidery man entered and bowed. "There is a girl here in Akal-jor, Illustrious Consar."

"Ah. Go on, Gaston." Consar's voice bubbled with soft power like lava. "You have acted rapidly and with customary clarity."

"She is a dancer in an escapeasy called the Maenad on the Street of Shadows. She is alive and vital and desirable as no woman among your women, My Ruler. She—"

"Bring her, Gaston, before dawn. After the worship, I'll take her back to Terra. Is she Martian?"

"Terro. Her name is Zaleel."

"Good. You can obtain the services of Silver Guards, as usual, under the Gray God's labor conscription edict fifty-seven."

The spidery little man bowed out. Consar III pressed a button. Soft durolite arms lowered him into the swirling waters of his pleasure pool. He sank slowly as the crystalline waters washed him gently in its bath of a thousand dreams.

SPIRALING patterns fused, disassociated atomic rejoined. Cadmus stumbled from the transmat receiver. As he lurched through dusty damp shadows, a familiar, non-terrestrial voice called. The Venusian padded toward him on webbed feet, green scales shining in the cold luciferin light of a trunjbug lamp.

Cadmus' voice was still shaky, rattling through the subterranean gloom somewhere below Akal-jor. He couldn't remember where. He could remember very little. "I've got to know more about the plan," he said quickly. "More about myself. This fog is driving me crazy!"

The ancient Venusian said. "You'll know more, a lot more, if you succeed in destroying the Great Machine. It wouldn't be safe

to know very much—at least until just before you're ready to strike. And you must strike the final blow at dawn."

"Was it necessary to wipe practically everything out of my mind," growled Cadmus. "I seem to be desperately groping for some memory, some facts that I should remember now! Do you—?"

"Forget everything but the immediate task before you," said Johlan tensely. "You strike just as dawn strikes. Just as millions of worshippers emerge from those transmats in the valley, the Great Gray God which they worship will die—before their eyes. They must see it die so they can carry eyewitness accounts back to their own worlds. We must succeed this time. Another solar year and the System will be too sunken in the disease of unchange and futility and defeat ever to change."

Cadmus breathed hoarsely. "Let me get on with it. Give me the necessary information!"

"Very well," sighed Johlan. "You have only one advantage. You realize what it is. Having been born in the asteroids, you don't have the disciplinary band in your head. The Guards, by using their coercion rays, can slay or paralyze any living inhabitant of the three worlds through the disciplinary band. That will allow you great advantage. Now—first you go to the Maenad on the Street of Shadows. Zaleel is a dancing girl there. She'll give you the equipment to destroy the Machine."

Cadmus gripped Johlan's boneless cold fingers. "I'll get the job done," said Cadmus with a certainty he was far from feeling.

Johlan nodded. "Straight ahead and up the first stairway. It will lead you directly onto the Street of Shadows."

Later, Cadmus gripped the sword hilt as he hugged the mouldy green wall of aged dhroon-stone. His eyes shifted up and down the crooked alley through filthy pools of splashing light from Phobos. Down its scrofulous length were a number of nameless dens and dives where defeated hopeless beings found solace in deadly drugs and deadlier dreams. He sucked in his breath. Yes—he had heard the jackboots on the stone street. Coming toward him from the direction of the Maenad, cutting off his advance. Part of a labor recruiting drive

no doubt. Phobos' pale light glowed on silver uniforms and an array of deadly weapons. They were fine looking soldiers though they were nothing really but slaves.

He slid the sword free. The energy weapon beneath his tunic must be saved for an extreme emergency. Swords had been in use when the Machine had been constructed. Anyone could still carry one. Few bothered. Few cared. They were past the hope of fighting.

Cadmus turned. He had to run away, away from the Maenad as well as the Guards. He might not get back and time was getting too precious. The city swarmed everywhere with Guards because of the great worship at dawn.

He snarled like a trapped animal as hunched shapes spilled from the dark before him. Huge shaggy Bluemarts from the desert caves. Anthropoid mutations of a savage intelligence at the end of an evolutionary blind alley. They mimicked the Guards, killed for them, captured labor conscripts for them. Sometimes they died, too, thought Cadmus as he ran among them, striking desperately in an attempt to cut his way through to escape the Guards.

Blood ran black. Bluemarts bellowed pain. Two sprawled out to writhe and die on the ancient stones. Long heavy leather whips studded with brass spikes crashed around Cadmus as he dodged and fought and danced away.

He saw the Guards, close now. They were confused. Their coercion rays were being used, Cadmus knew, but he had no disciplinary band. A policejet came down and hovered overhead. A brilliant search beam slithered over the walls. A whiplash crashed against his shoulder, stunning him. Another scraped cloth and flesh from his side.

Dazed, he reached for his energy gun. But that whiplash had ripped away his harness, holster, gun and all. He staggered along the wall. A dull roaring pounded in his temples. Then he heard the unreal, whining voice of the old woman from the thick shadows of the wall. He heard but he could see nothing of her.

There was a dismal creaking of stone on stone.

"This way, my dear boy. Quickly, or you're a dead one!"

II

HER hand was hard and dry, running down his torn arm like a deadly scorpion. The aperture in the wall opened further and a hot, stinking wind belched out. He dropped as paws gripped his booted ankles from behind. He twisted, thrust his sword into a shaggy throat. His hand felt the harness he had lost. He dragged it inside with him, into a black, forgotten hole.

The opening closed. There was an invisible stench of stale bodies and drug vapor. He could hear the old woman's hoarse breathing. He hooked the broken harness about his waist.

"Light," he gasped. "What's this, a tomb?"

"It will be, dear boy," she said. "We must move quickly down into the catacombs. I wear the receiver band. I feel them groping, but it's you they want. They don't know I'm helping you, and they don't want an old bag of bones like me. But hurry. They'll blast in the wall."

Flame glowed. She lighted a smoky taper. He saw a bent ragged packet of animated bones, a mop of gray hair and a narrow hawked beak. In niches along the winding cavern, shapes stirred. Moisture dripped. Turgid Lethean vapors from escapist drugs curled sluggishly. Skeletal faces stared, glazed and unseeing, dying.

Cadmus swore. Three worlds were dying like this. A vast social system that had stopped moving, evolving, so it was dying. Fast! A yellow Martian girl's luminous eyes stared vacantly into shadows, buried in some dream far from the hopeless, meaningless reality.

Cadmus studied the old woman with growing suspicion. The amnesia was a throbbing ache of unknowing. If he only knew more. There was so much he felt he had to know, right now, but he couldn't remember! Who was this sudden benefactress? Not from the Asteroids, for she wore the disciplinary band. Yet she had saved him, preserved him a little longer to carry out an impossible task.

She turned, anticipating his suspicion. "Zaleel sent me. You can trust me, Cadmus. I know these catacombs. I'm old Pirri who sells her Lethean drugs along the forgotten places of Akal-jor. You Cadmeans have a

few sympathizers. Some still have hope. The Cadmean society is that hope."

A wave of fear blew through Cadmus' fogged brain. "Cadmeans. My—memory! Johlan erased almost everything. I remember nothing—yet—there's something—something I've got to remember!"

She didn't answer. They walked on. A Martian half-breed ogled them from a niche in the stone, jaws chewing the mind-shattering pulp of the Venusian thiln-flower. Wrecks of three worlds. They believed in nothing but their dreams—and the Gray God in the valley. The former they believed in as an only escape from a hopeless reality. The latter, because they had been conditioned to regard it as a god, as omnipotent.

You may fear a god, and hate a god, Cadmus mused, but you cannot desert a faith with impunity.

"You know a lot of Cadmus and the Cadmeans," he said as they walked deeper into the gloom. "I know nothing. Nothing! Listen, who is Cadmus?" He frowned. A ridiculous question.

"You are he," said Old Pirri. "Gods and heroes will never die."

"Who am I?"

"Cadmus."

He swore. His head ached more with doubts and hidden fears. A desperate yearning to *know* clawed frantically in his skull.

Old Pirri said. "There is a myth, centuries old, dear boy." Her voice softened. "But myths repeat themselves. They're rooted in the soul. In this myth, that was born on Terra when it was young and fresh and when blood was hot with early flames, there was a prince. He was tall and strong, and his skin was gold over muscles of steel."

She peered over her shoulder. "His name was Cadmus."

"Yes."

"Prince Cadmus slew a dragon and sowed its teeth. From these sprang armed men who fought and founded a great city—"

"Teeth—dragon—armed men, what are the symbols here?" A strange thrill trembled in him as the words took hold.

"You are the son of a much more recent Cadmus who was named from that ancient myth. Only he knew why he called himself

Cadmus. He kept that secret to himself. But you are his son. If anyone knows your father's great secret of why he called himself Cadmus, it is you. You are Cadmus, now."

"But Johlan—he stifled my brain so the Guards couldn't probe my secrets—"

Old Pirri's eyes glowed, became red pools. "Zaleel told me. She, too, is ignorant of many things other than her assigned duties. Beware, lovely boy. Beware of friends and patriots who are out to achieve selfish ends. Beware even Zaleel, and Johlan, and Old Pirri. Remember history, and recall that when the Great Machine God was spawned and stopped all progress, wars were brewing between the worlds. Remember that was the reason the Machine was made—to halt progress and social evolution that might lead to another atom war. If the Machine is destroyed, remember that the old hates will return. For the ancient hates between peoples and planets and ideas still smolder."

Cadmus shivered. The sword hilt was ice in his grasp.

THEY turned. Several corridors branched into black mouths. Bats darted from hollows. Nothing must deter him from his objective. Yet—Old Pirri spoke wisdom. When the Machine quit, the three worlds would be plunged into chaotic anarchy. No government would exist until some kind of governmental agency was established. Who, then, or what group, would aspire to power? Consar III of course, if he lived. Others if there were others who still knew how to think.

They came into a subterranean street illuminated with cold luciferin light. Escape-easies lined its length. A forgotten river flowing from ennui to forgetfulness, and death. Archways crumbled overhead. Purple spider webs shimmered.

"We're directly under the Street of Shadows," said Old Pirri. Sense-drunkening music floated from dark maws. "Just inside that escapeasy, Cadmus. A door just inside leads up into the Street of Shadows, and into the Maenad." She gripped his arm. Tears shone in her eyes.

She took a chain from about her neck. A square of metal dangled heavily from the chain as she put it over Cadmus' head.

"Dear boy," she said, "this is a small force-shield device. I got it from a Cadmean who was killed in the last revolt. Press this small lever." She demonstrated. The unit hummed with power. It glowed with a strong effulgence. "This will nullify the vibroguns of the Guards, for a while anyway."

Footsteps pounded. Old Pirri screeched, horribly, then went down on her knees. "Run—dear boy. Guards—" her voice shattered with pain. Her flesh jerked with the agony of a vibro-beam.

But he was safe, thought Cadmus quickly, while a sad rage wrenched his heart. She had sacrificed herself for him. She had given him the little force-shield unit.

He dropped down behind a crumbling column near the old woman as three Guards edged along the street. "Back—into the wall—find Maenad." Red froth specked her lips. "Beware all who might get power—when you slay—the Gray God—dear boy—"

She died. A blind rage burned up, flamed in Cadmus' brain. He yelled wildly as he raked the energy gun from his tunic and fired point blank at the approaching Guards.

Part of the street, with the Guards in it, erupted in a sheet of white flame. Shattered bodies, bits of uniform spread out through blazing columns like an unfolding flower. He dropped the burned-out gun and leaped backward, into the wall.

He ran blindly. Many-legged rats spilled out into the dark, ran with glowing eyes beside him. Pink, fleshy scorpions scurried before the vibrations of the blast. Later he found a wandering Venusian drug-peddler who guided him to the trap-door leading up into the Maenad. It was only a few minutes now, until dawn.

There were no Guards in the escapeasy. Dancing girls from three worlds danced with a bored lifelessness. All except one. Zaleel. A flood of red-gold hair, flashing rust-flecked eyes, and smooth agile limbs. Her vitality failed to stir the sluggish futility clouding the Maenad. Her eyes flashed recognition as Cadmus edged along the wall and sat down in a shadowed booth. As the climax of her dance ended she walked to his booth and sat across from him. There was no applause. Apathetic eyes

failed to follow the lithe swing of her gleaming body.

He held her hands, felt the animal warmth sparkle and tingle in his arms. "You made it, Cadmus," she breathed, eyes glowing. "I knew you would. I've got the microtape here. It's all you need to destroy the Machine—if you can reach it."

She handed him a small role of microtape. "Listen, Zaleel," he said, "I'm going crazy because of this amnesia Johlan threw over my brain. I tell you there's something vital to the plan I should know."

"You've got to keep blind faith. We can't hesitate now."

He told her about Old Pirri. She blinked at tears.

"Poor Old Pirri. She was in the first revolt. She was captured, had a disciplinary band put in her head, and slaved five years in one of Consar's mines. She lived only to see the Machine's end."

"She died too soon," said Cadmus.

"Your memory will return if you succeed, Cadmus. Johlan planted a threshold-response word in your subconscious mind. When you hear that word your full memory will come back. I heard him make the posthypnotic suggestion. But I can't tell you what it is. If you were captured—"

"I know. How and when will I receive this word?"

"It will be on millions of lips—if you succeed."

CADMUS said quickly. "All right. Give me the details, and let me get at it! Now what's the microtape for?"

She leaned forward. The fragrance of her hair was a promise.

"You know how the Machine's mechanical brain operates. But because of your amnesia, maybe I'd better refresh your memory. Now—any question, social, economic, individual, is submitted to the supreme council in the council tower. On the top of the tower is the question submission chamber. There are big digital panel-boards with facilities to receive the questions and problems which are submitted on microtapes.

"These microtapes are placed before the photoelectric analyzing eyes of the digital panels. From there, the problems or questions are carried by electron beam tubes

directly into the Machine for solving. The Machine's answer comes back through the electron beam tubes and is recorded on answer tapes. Audio tapes are recorded and broadcast from the tower. Also the broadcast is received in every Martian city and is conveyed to Venus and Earth by etheromagnum. You remember all this?"

"Some of it," said Cadmus, frowning. "Go on."

"The Machine's doom is in that microtape I've given you, Cadmus. It contains a highly complex problem which Johlan has worked out during all these years of isolation on our asteroid. You have only to get inside that question submission chamber in the council tower. Get that tape in front of those analyzing eyes. That's all. Get the problem on that tape into the brain of the Machine."

He looked at her steadily. "And then—is that the end of the plan?"

Her hand trembled. "There's you and I, after that."

"I remember that, Zaleel. If I succeed, it's you and me together, in a new System of progress and change and hope. If I fail—"

"If we fail, Cadmus, there'll be nothing for you and me. Nothing for anyone, ever again."

He got to his feet quickly. "Zaleel, what's your part in it? Why are you dancing here?"

Red flushed her face. "I knew that one of Consar's scouts would find me during the worship. One has already found me. They'll be here to pick me up before dawn."

He gripped her shoulders, hard. His face worked with unvoiced emotion.

"I've got to do it, Cadmus. My father died in one of Consar's Lunarian mines. He died—horribly. I'll settle with Consar myself. I have an explosive lithium capsule which . . ." It would be easier to do it than to talk about it.

She finished. "Everything will be dead then that threatens our System. The Machine, Consar, the Guards—they'll die when the Machine goes. The council tower will be the next center of governmental operations, no matter who handles it. The people have grown accustomed to receiving all their commands from the Tower."

"I'll see you then," said Cadmus. "If we succeed." He went quickly out into the

Street of Shadows.

HE FLATTENED against the wall as the five Guards came past and turned into the Maenad. A civilian was among them, a grotesque little man, like a spider. His garments were studded with jewels and precious stones which could only signify that he was one of Consar III's personal slaves.

Which, in turn, signified that they had come for Zaleel.

A bitter hate burned in Cadmus as he edged past the Maenad's entrance toward the policejet the Guards and the civilian had parked in the street. He unsheathed his sword. He turned the little force field unit to full power. This was it. Dawn was about to break.

He had the advantage of surprise and here was a way. He knew he could never get into that council tower from the ground levels. It was too heavily guarded. He might manage it from the air.

He ran straight out of the shadows, taking advantage of the surprise that froze the two Guards standing outside the entrance panel of the policejet. Deimos blinked as Cadmus' sword struck. Its light was red. The slain Guard sank wordlessly in a fresh warm pool that was redder still on the worn stones.

Cadmus laughed tonelessly as he struck again.

III

THE second Guard's face lost its sharply disciplined mask for an instant, then he, too, died in the shadow of his glistening plane. Cadmus was retrieving their weapons as two more Guards ran out of the Maenad toward him, evidently called by one of the two slain Guards before they died.

Cadmus shot the policejet straight up beneath a blast of fire. Through the pre-dawn chill, he angled it toward the council tower. He had only minutes now to get inside the Tower and get that microtape before the Machine's analyzing eyes.

Below him sprawled the spires and sharp minarets of the ancient capital city. To the east beyond the fifth cut-off from the Low Canal, was the newer modernistic plastic

council tower, rearing up into the sky for a mile, directly in the valley's mouth.

Beyond the council tower was the gigantic rounded dome of the Great Machine, gleaming dully in the mists. To the right was Consar III's pleasure palace, glittering like a monstrous and evil jewel.

Zaleel would be there soon, groveling among his slaves.

Now, from various roofports all over the city, silver policejets began to dot the sky. Cadmus unhooked an antigrav belt from beneath the seat. He pressed a stud and the cowling above him slid open. He belted the antigrav belt about his waist and stood up.

The council tower was a mile distant. A parabola would allow him to reach it, if he could avoid being spotted by the Guards while falling.

About twenty policejets, in formation as usual, were coming in from his right. He raised both neutron guns, fired, simultaneously. He used both weapons' full charge.

An incredible blast ripped out, leaving paths of condensation in its wake. Radiant energy spread forth in its basest and most deadly form, heating intolerably by sudden kinetic interchange. There was a devastating fire, a supernal electronic flash. Radiant energy blinded and burned.

The pre-dawn grayness became searing light. For an instant the area was bombarded with fragments of molten metal. But Cadmus had sent his plane in a sudden leap high above the disaster even as he fired. His plane trembled, then began to burn. Its metal hull became unbearable.

Cadmus leaped out into the darkness and began floating down, utilizing the antigrav belt's angle facets to control the direction of his fall. He looked about him. A mile behind, a hundred or so policejets were converging on that spot where he had created the sudden holocaust. By lifting his own plane and bailing out, he had put himself half a mile away, a small dark speck, falling in a slow curve directly at the top of the council tower.

The policejets were swinging away in large, ever-increasing circles, searching. Far away, he saw his own jetplane burst suddenly into white flame and crash into the sluggish red waters of the canal. Most of the policejets headed for it. Apparently

there was no suspicion that he had been able to escape the ship.

Cadmus struck the top of the Tower. The mile-high dome was cold and smooth as ice as he slid down its side onto a narrow ramp. He lay flat for a moment in order to get back his strength. The city was moving from its somnolence. Beings shuffling from drugged states to worship the Gray God of stability. It was eternal slavery or death to neglect the worship.

Far below he could see a balcony opening into what would be the question submission chamber. Utilizing the antigrav belt, Cadmus slid from the ramp, down the shadowed side of the Tower. He attained the balcony and crouched behind the colonnade. The sun peered over the mountains. It reached into the valley, lapping the Machine's towering skull with crimson tongues.

Streaming from the city's main avenues, a solid river of Akal-jor's inhabitants were marching to worship at the shrine of the Gray God.

Cadmus stared at the fantastic and horrible scene. Worshipping a machine that had chained them to its unchanging pattern and was killing them. A thunderous chorus of wailing and chanting rose in a moan of suppliance.

From every city on Mars, via transmat, other rivers of worshippers were debouching into the valley. For a brief time they would gaze with trembling awe at the monstrous metal dome that ruled them inexorably, then return to their hopeless patterns.

Via huge transmats on Terra and Venus, other rivers of worshippers numbering millions were flowing across the void. They, too, would gaze upon the Gray God's face, then return by transmat sender to their own worlds. Cadmus stared in sudden shocked fear. One abruptly obvious and terrible fact left him stunned.

The great transmats on the right side of the valley were not disgorging any worshippers. Nothing was emerging from the Venusian transmats.

NO VENUSIANS WERE COMING TO WORSHIP THE GRAY GOD.

BEWILDERED, stunned, Cadmus ran through the panels into the vaulted height of the question submission chamber.

He would worry about this other fearful emergency once he got the microtape installed.

Across the chamber were panels containing many eyes of the photoelectric analyzers—lenses which must focus his microtape. Receptacles in front of the eyes waited for the microtape to be inserted. A red light indicated that none of the eyes were being used at that moment to analyze a problem for the Machine.

A problem scanned by these eyes was carried into the Machine by electron beam tube. The Machine, a colossal mechanical brain, was the result of the final achievements of the finest scientific minds in the System.

It could think. It could think, but its answers could never vary. The Gray God.

Cadmus ran across the chamber, inserted the microtape on its spindle shaft and moved a small switch. The eyes glowed. The red light dimmed into green, signifying that the Machine was now handling a problem.

Cadmus stumbled back toward the windows. There was no feeling of triumphant release for having fulfilled his destiny. Now that the problem Johlan had devised was submitted to the Machine's vast mechanical mind, the Machine was supposed to destroy itself.

But the big problem now was why weren't those transmats bringing Venusians to worship the Gray God? Why should only streams of screaming psychopaths from Terra and Mars march out of transmats to their pathetic worship?

What had Old Pirri said?

"Beware of friends and patriots who are such only to achieve selfish ends. Remember history, and recall that when the Great Machine God was spawned and stopped all progress, wars were brewing between the worlds. Remember that was the reason the Machine was made—to halt progress and social evolution that might lead to another atom war. If the Machine is destroyed, remember that the old old hates will return . . ."

Cadmus shivered as he hesitated before the panels leading onto the balcony. The sun was higher now. The area about the valley was a sea of surging humanity marching out of transmat receivers.

And the Machine lay there in its vaulted silence. That mass of thinking apparatus was preparing now to solve the problem which Johlan had prepared and which Cadmus had succeeded in injecting into its mechanical brain. It would take a few minutes at least before any results appeared.

But Cadmus knew something was terribly wrong. No Venusians were yet emerging from those transmats!

A number of policejets were circling the areas about the non-functioning Venusian transmats. A greater number had landed and Cadmus could see Guards running in and out of the powerhouses.

He turned quickly as he heard the panels of the doors opening behind him. He dropped to his side, dragged frantically at the neutron gun in his belt. He caught a smearing glimpse of many faces and acted too late to save himself.

He tried to activate the force shield unit Old Pirri had given him. But paralysis beams reached out like the fingers of a hand, gripped him, held him rigid in a slowly-fading consciousness. He thought of Zaleel. He tried to understand how their plan had seemed to succeed, but had failed.

IV

THE voice penetrated through layers of pain. Cadmus lay outstretched, his eyes remained closed.

"The probers won't find anything more. I know his name. I know a little about him. But very little. He is Cadmus, the son of the first Cadmus who started the first revolt against our great System. The revolt failed of course."

A whining voice answered. "I've revived him, my ruler. He feigns unconsciousness."

"Open your eyes, Cadmus," said the heavy thick voice ironically. "Open them and look at the destruction you have brought upon our nice stable order."

Cadmus sat up, blinked back nauseous fog. An unbelievably fat man sat before him on a golden throne, studded with precious stones. A cloud of metallic birds piped a strange subdued song. Cadmus' eyes shifted to the spidery little man standing beside the throne. But Consar III gestured, and the spidery little man bowed out.

The room was bare except for several

mind-probing machines, and wire mesh cages with graph screens. There was little on the screens. Johlan's amnesia injection had been very effective, thought Cadmus. Too effective. He was helpless now unless he got his memory back. He knew part of the answer. His father was the first Cadmus. And there had been a reason for calling himself that. It was of vast importance. But that threshold response word. The key word—it might never be heard now.

He was fully clothed but he was without weapons. The force field generator was gone. His antigrav belt had been taken from him.

Cadmus said, "I never expected to meet you alive, Consar."

Consar's mountain of flesh trembled in a rumbling laugh. "So many unpredictable games the jester Chance plays, eh. It doesn't matter now what you did or didn't expect."

Cadmus started. He knew that Consar was mad with power. He knew nothing else about Consar III, except that Zaleel was to have killed him with a lithium capsule, and that she had failed.

"We tapped your mind, Cadmus. I know a great deal about you, but so little, too. You submitted a problem to the Machine—we shall refer to it as a Machine as neither of us are quite convinced that it's a god—and your purpose was that the Machine was to have destroyed itself."

Consar laughed. "It was a ridiculous purpose. You rebels with your high ideals of progress and change! Progress and change are the great errors of entropy, Cadmus. But it's too late to discuss that now. You submitted the problem but the Machine still functions."

Consar smiled. "You have driven the Machine, insane!"

Cadmus' throat was dry, thick. He didn't understand.

"Come, I'll show you." Consar III pressed a button. The throne carried his bulk across the marble floor to the wide windows overlooking the council tower and the valley of the Machine.

"You see, Cadmus. The Machine is insane. You submitted a problem to it. I don't know what the nature of the problem was, its details, but it was planned to be unsolvable to the Machine. Although the Machine isn't organic, it functions much

like an organic brain. Faced with an unsolvable problem that nevertheless must be solved, a human mind goes insane. Our Machine did the same thing. Insanity is a decision of a sort. Sometimes it's the only logical answer to a dilemma. That seems to be the case this time."

Cadmus stared, but he still found it difficult to grasp the scene below. What he saw and heard through the opened windows was horrible beyond the maddest nightmare. The Venusian transmats were still dead. No Venusians were emerging into the valley. But vast rivers of humans from Terra, and Martians from all the cities, were spilling in great masses into the valley—

And to their death!

Wailing, crying in sobbing ecstasy, these rivers were pouring directly into that half-mile deep area of deadly radioactivity surrounding the Machine.

Cadmus murmured in sheer horror. Millions were dying. Millions more would die. The valley was a gigantic pit of carnage. Unless it were stopped every living person on Terra would march out of those transmats and die. So would every living Martian.

"Like the lemmings," said Consar III absently. "A suicide drive. See what you Cadmeans have done with your foolish revolt. Listen to the voice from the council tower."

Cadmus was listening. A decision from the Machine was automatically transcribed and broadcast from the Tower.

"Listen to what the Tower is saying. The voice of the god. It couldn't solve the answer it was forced to answer in any other way except by this extreme and apparently insane way. Yet if this is the only way it could answer the question, then it's logical isn't it? Logical that its answer should be one of defeat, futility, abandonment of all hope."

From the Tower the public address system thundered out over the wailing shambles of destruction in the valley. Its waves of sound bludgeoned the helpless, milling hordes into an ecstatic suicidal rush.

"Life has no meaning. All is futility. There is no hope. The only way out of this problem is death. Death is the final and complete escape."

CONSAR said. "Few are ignoring the Machine's voice. That's natural. They have long since abandoned hope. Without progress, with no goal, the Machine's answer is logical to them. It's very interesting, this end of System life, isn't it, Cadmus? Look at the rabble. Look at the bawling cattle you dedicated your life to save. What have you done but pushed them on down into the slime where they belong?"

Cadmus hardly heard Consar's cynical humor. His head throbbed. Blood rushed his temples as he tried to break that web of amnesia. It was there, the answer, the solution.

Johlan! He was Venusian. And no Venusians were dying in the valley. The sudden clarity of the monstrous truth hit him like an explosion. Johlan had formulated a problem to submit to the Machine. True. But not to destroy it. Only to cause its reaction to be analogous to those of an insane brain.

Now it was directing the suicide of its worshippers. But not of Venusians. The old hates still smoldering . . .

A few inhabitants of Terra and Mars might remain alive when this ghastly massacre ended. But Venus would be untouched. Johlan had brought about a monstrous suicidal drive that would decimate the Terran and Martian population. And leave Venus the unchallenged ruler of the System.

And Consar III laughed. Cadmus lunged at his throat. His hands struck an invisible barrier. From behind the shield surrounding his throne, Consar smiled.

"You're helpless now, Cadmus. I see you've noticed that the Venusian transmats are dead. The Guards have investigated. The power generators have been destroyed so they won't work anymore without being repaired. You've taken the rule of the System from the unchanging Machine, and have given it back to the people. Therefore you've destroyed the System. Already the Venusians are trying to wipe out Terra and Mars."

Cadmus pounded against the invisible barrier.

"You can't touch me, Cadmus. And what would it gain for you if you did? We probed your girl comrade's brain, too. She came here to kill me, but she had hidden

the explosion somewhere and the Guards couldn't locate it. She's gone now. She was taken to the slave quarters. But none of the slaves are in their quarters now. They have all gone into the valley to march into the Machine.

"You see, Cadmus, everyone is conditioned to carry out the Machine's dictates. Those who do not follow the commands of the Machine will be driven into the valley and to death anyway by the Guards. The Guards, too, will walk into the Machine to their deaths when everyone else is dead. Including me. The Guards will force me to my death, too, Cadmus. I have utilized the Guards only within the limitations of the Machine's laws, you understand. Everyone will die except the Venusians. Let them have it! I've enjoyed myself. I'm ready to make my exit."

Cadmus ran back to the window.

POLICEJETS were circling above the marching hordes of suicidals, raying those who fell out of the surging river. Thousands of Guards were circulating at the edges of the human tide, keeping the lines solid, threatening stragglers with neutron charges. There were few stragglers. In that hopeless, un-evolving system, the majority had wanted to die. The Machine was sanctioning their psychotic desires.

And somewhere, perhaps in that horde, Zaleel was trapped. Or she might already be dead.

Regardless of the amnesia, his hopeless position, Cadmus saw one thing he could do if he could escape. Try to destroy as many of those transmats as possible and stop the flow of doomed Terrans and Martians. Johlan had stopped the Venusian transmats by destroying the generators. He could do the same.

From the Tower the thunderous voice of the mad Machine still called:

Life has no meaning. All is futility. There is no hope.

Cadmus tried to shut out the sound. He knew that if he had to listen to it very long, its suggestion would overpower him.

His own voice buried the voice of the mad Machine momentarily.

"It isn't over yet, Consar. You're a victim of unchange like every other poor suicidal out there. The blood of millions

who have died in your enslavement is on your hands. Your only excuse is that there never was hope for humanity anyway. But there is, Consar. And I'll prove it to you. You'll die, but I'll prove the truth to you before I kill you."

Consar laughingly waved a flabby white hand. "The magic shadow show still goes on. Join it. I'm not holding you here. See—the doors are opening for you. Without the rigid discipline of the Machine, System life will destroy itself. Every institution contains the seeds of its own destruction. Even the Machine. Blind tropisms, rabble, robots, cattle. Those are the stupid dolts you Cadmeans dedicated your lives to save, to set free. Freedom! Hah!" Consar broke into a rumbling laugh. But Cadmus didn't hear it.

Freedom.

FREEDOM!

Cadmus leaned against the coruscating wall. A thrill of returning memory flooded him.

Freedom! That was the key word. Zaleel had said that if the Machine were destroyed the word would be on millions of lips.

Ironical that Consar should have spoken the word unwittingly and set Cadmus' mental fountain of memory free. Behind closed eyes, in a brief flash of recollection, Cadmus' memory, his destiny, his potentiality, returned.

He knew why he was called Cadmus.

HIS father, the first Cadmus of the newer myth. The greatest hero of the System. For years, since the Machine had been placed in power, his father had worked toward its destruction. A shadow, a mystery in the starways. He had gotten scientists and had constructed secret arsenals. He had constructed small matter transmitters and installed a secret transmat underground between the three worlds and the asteroids.

In the asteroid belt had been thousands of free men who hadn't had the disciplinary bands installed in their skulls because they had been born there in the belt, away from all legislative control, of mucker parents. Men and women and children who were inaccessible in the thousands of uncharted little worlds between Terra and Mars.

Led by his father, they had attacked

through the transmats and had marched on the council tower and the Machine. But they had been defeated, slain and taken into slavery. Only a few escaped. Only three. Two children, Cadmus and Zaleel. And Johlan. They returned to the asteroids to plan the second revolt.

But they had marched on the Machine, knowing it was surrounded by half a mile of deadly radioactivity. And now Cadmus knew how his father had expected to overthrow the Machine in spite of this barrier. His father had planned the direct assault on the Machine—alone. His father had trusted no one. He had laid the groundwork, had accomplished the whole preparation himself. He had been intending to launch the direct attack on the Machine by releasing the armed men.

*... slew a dragon and sowed its teeth.
From these sprang armed men ...*

Young as he had been then, Cadmus still remembered starkly. His father had given him the information and directions. No one else knew. Johlan had suspected. That was why he had blanked out Cadmus' mind until his own terrible plan had been achieved.

Cadmus could hear his father's words now, plainly, after the many years. As his father lay dying in a hidden cavern after having failed to reach the other great cave on the side of the valley facing the Machine.

"I've worked it for almost a century, son—the armed men—transported them one by one from Terra by transmat ... an underground filled with armed men ... ready to march into the Machine ... ready to blast its accursed heart ... the lever is under the roots of the komble-plant at the mouth of the cavern ... when the doors are opened ..."

His father had given him the directions, how to reach that secret cavern where the armed men waited. Then he had died. The three survivors had been waiting for Cadmus, and they escaped, returned to the asteroids via transmat. Johlan, the leading scientist, had raised and educated Zaleel and Cadmus.

Cadmus was running across the room. He heard Consar's laughter fading behind him as he ran into the hall. But the pattern was clear in Cadmus' mind.

V

CADMUS dodged into a doorway as Guards came down the hall pursuing three Martians. Behind him he caught a glimpse of a huge pleasure pool in a lethean garden. Vacant now, its hedonistic lovers caught up in a grisly destiny.

The two Guards were chasing three Martians who hadn't digested the idea of suicide, evidently. As the Guards raised vibro-guns, Cadmus hurled himself through the doorway. His leap carried one of the Guards to the floor. One desperate blow knocked that Guard senseless. Cadmus raised the Guard's vibro-gun and brought the other man to the floor in a paralyzed sprawl.

The Machine's voice still thundered from the Tower as Cadmus ran from the palace, into the street toward the valley's mouth. The city was almost deserted now, except for a few Guards and policejets circling, hunting out deserters from the suicidal march.

Cadmus ran frantically, straining, along the street, keeping next the shadowed wall. But no Guards bothered him now. To them he was another suicidal lemming who had gotten the call belatedly.

His breath came harshly, burning fire. His muscles groaned as he forced himself up the steep rocky slope leading up and along the valley's rim.

His father's directions were vivid in his mind now as he staggered along the wind-whipped trail. Higher and higher until the mid-afternoon winds were a thousand icy lances driving through his sweating body.

He finally dropped in a gasping heap at the base of the flowering komble-plant. To his right was the high flat wall of granite. Huge doors were behind the red clay and dust, waiting to open. A high wide door.

His hands clawed at the red clay. His fingers bled as the hard cracked stuff came away in reluctant layers. His fingers grated on metal. Frantically he tore at the clay binding the small lever.

Below him in the vast valley, the carnage continued. The radioactive field was piled with uncountable bodies. Only deep within the radioactive field did the gamma rays have the intensity to kill quickly. But much further out, thousands were dying as the

radioactivity spread through the bodies of comrades. Masses behind kept moving, surging, pressing forward, hurling walls of humanity into the deadly field.

Cadmus shoved the lever. The massive doors broke through the years of clay camouflage behind him. A grinding roar shattered the thin air. Startled, Cadmus cried out, and leaped away. He was running desperately out of the field of the armed men who came darting in deadly ferocity from the silence of their ancient crypt.

Huge, glistening, streamlined metal monsters. They shot from the dark opening. A line of twenty, they glowed with a deadly field of gamma radiation and death spray. And Cadmus kept running away from them. His heart pounded with a deathly fear and awe as he hurled himself down the steep trail. He glanced back a few times. That was enough.

Those great metal tanks were deadly to any living thing near them. They sped from the cavern, headed in a grim straight line directly for the Machine. Once set as his father had set their automatic robot controls long ago, nothing could divert them from their objective. Straight down the slope they plunged in silent, ferocious intent.

Cadmus remembered other things now. Of how his father had installed secretly a transmat sender in a Terran museum where such curious mementos as giant robot tanks were no longer of interest to Terrans. One by one, via transmat, the tanks had been transported to this hidden cavern on the edge of the valley.

In that last ghastly war, robot tanks and drone planes had been employed almost entirely in place of human beings. Atomic engines were built and used to drive these drone planes, tanks, ships. But no living thing could pilot them, nor come within a quarter of a mile of them, and survive.

They were robot controlled. Man's final contribution to annihilative warfare. Equipped with raw, unshielded atomic engines, the tanks were deadly beyond imagination, with atomic bombs as warheads, and giving off a sheet of robot death-spray. They were impervious to any kind of atomic weapons for they were the ultimate in robot-controlled atomic weapons. Silent, implacable, they rushed down the slope, over rock and through brush, and finally over

mounds of dead and dying. The human lemmings rushing to their death didn't notice the tanks. They did not notice anything.

Up and up over mounds of clawing bodies and hills of dead the terrible robot weapons climbed. Over heaps of human lemmings, red and yellow and black Terrans, and yellow Martians. And then they struck the smooth gleaming side of the Machine.

The machine exploded!

The valley was suddenly a seething boiling cloud of chaos. Bits of Gray God rained for miles over the desert, mountains and ruins of Akal-jor. Boiling dust clouds rose blackly, flung by a tremendous flash like a ball of fire the size of the setting sun. Churning debris climbed thousands of feet in the air, while smoke climbed higher. The dying day was relighted by a searing light, golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. Then came the first of a series of air-blasts, to be followed almost immediately by the sustained and awesome roar.

Cadmus stumbled to his knees. He crawled, managed to regain his feet, lurched blindly through clouds of choking dust. His clothing hung in strips. Blood seeped from his ears and nose. Somehow he managed to deactivate the rest of the transmats. For although the Machine was now utterly destroyed the great crater that remained was even more deadly in its neutron and gamma radiation than before.

The last of the matter transmitters stopped working. The rivers of desperate beings were dammed. On Terra and in the Martian cities, waiting worshippers were wondering what had happened as their own transmat senders stopped functioning.

They waited for a long time. They waited until it finally occurred to them that the transmats might never function again. They wondered, and kept on waiting. But three quarters of the Terran and Martian population had been saved from suicide.

Cadmus dragged himself up the sweeping steps of the council tower. It was dark now. And silent. On three worlds, people waited, not yet aware of the full significance of what had happened.

Phobos was a hurtling curse in the sky. Deimos was edging up into the night like an afterthought. Cadmus stumbled. He

staggered to the elevator and inside. He watched the lights blinking as he climbed to the Tower's top. He went into a hall leading to the large audi-chamber.

A massive bulk lay sprawled in the shadows. Consar III. His flesh was charred. Even the brilliant jewels that had bedecked him seemed exhausted of their luster.

Cadmus paused. Consar hadn't wanted to die, not really. He, too, had come to the Tower. He hadn't given up his position of power and wealth easily. He had come to the Tower to attempt to assume the direct power that the Machine had once controlled. Someone had prevented him. Johlan?

He peered through the opening into a large, gloomy chamber. It contained the transcription and audiocasting facilities of the council tower. Somewhere, the ten council members, aged children conditioned to voice the dictates of the Machine, were crouched in blank fear.

A large audiocasting set was humming in the far corner of the room, a strip of tape running beneath its electronic needle.

Cadmus stopped in the shadows. He had made his way to the Tower fast. He had heard that voice from the Tower, and it had changed. He knew whose voice had replaced the voice of the Machine. Johlan.

Cadmus' eyes adjusted to the gloom. The Venusians preferred gloom. Then, beside a recorder across the large chamber, Cadmus saw the greenly iridescent body of the Venusian crouched over a microphone, recording more tape for the audiocaster.

Cadmus listened to Johlan's voice coming from the loudspeaker atop the Tower.

"The Great Gray God of stability was only a Machine. It has been destroyed. The Venusians destroyed it to save the System from disaster through the Machine's static pattern of unchange. But a tri-planetary government of organic agency must replace the Machine. There cannot be a return of old inter-world antagonisms. There must be a united System. A tri-planetary government will be established here on Mars. Directives will soon follow from the council tower that once voiced the machine-dictates of the Gray God. The Ven—"

Cadmus fired. Not at Johlan. The Venusian's recorded message stopped as the blast from Cadmus' gun melted the audio unit. The thundering voice from the Tower's

summit died. Johlan turned quickly.

"That was enough of that speech," said Cadmus. "So far, you spoke very well. There'll be a new tri-planetary government, but the Venusians aren't dictating terms from this Tower. No one world will dictate any terms from anywhere."

"Wait," interrupted Johlan. "Don't fire, Cadmus. We can rule together."

Cadmus' voice was brittle as steel. "You're worse than Consar, worse than the Machine. Millions have died today because of you. Because of old greeds and ambitions you couldn't bury—dreams of Venusian imperialism."

"The Venusians never got fair representation from the System," cried Johlan. "They never will. Fishmen! That's what you call us!"

His lidless eyes gleamed as his hand flashed. Cadmus yelled once, then fell to his knees as a ray of neuron-shattering force from a paralysis gun swept across his knees. His legs crumbled him to his side. Another stream soaked into his arm. His neutron gun toppled from nerveless fingers.

The fingers of his other hand crawled toward it. That arm went dead. Only his torso was still capable of sensation. Cadmus turned fevered eyes on Johlan. He waited, his heart pounding. The little Venusian's scales glinted with triumph as he padded forward on webbed feet.

"YOU did a fine job, Cadmus," he said, looking down. "No one else but you could have accomplished it. No one else had the will, the courage, or the strength and audacity. Nor the human gullibility. That's why I used you."

Johlan paused. He looked away from the window. A splash of white moonlight flooded down, rippled over the mosaic floor. It glinted from Johlan's scales and danced in his lidless eyes. His voice was dreamy with power. "My question to the Machine was simple. I merely devised a series of opposed questions, requiring one answer for all of them. In other words, the Machine was forced to make a compromise. But the Machine was fixed. It couldn't make a compromise. It had to go insane."

He looked back down at Cadmus. "That

was a magnificent idea of your father's—those ancient tanks from the atom war. He was a great man. Maybe the greatest Terran who ever lived. But I'm a Venusian. I am greater, because I used him. And I used you, his son. So Cadmus slew the dragon and sewed its teeth, and from these sprang armed men!"

Johlan smiled gently. "But the dragon was never really slain, Cadmus. I was the dragon."

Cadmus heard the door open. He heard her voice, sharp and clear. It was beautiful, he thought, like music. Though music could never be so deadly.

"But dragons always die, Johlan."

The Venusian gasped as he turned. He started to die as he faced her. The death ray glowed on his green-scaled chest for a while, then faded as the Venusian stumbled across the room, the neutron gun hanging limply and forgotten in his webbed hand. He finished dying with his face pressed hard against the window.

Far away, Venus shimmered brightly in the sky.

She knelt beside Cadmus. Her kisses were wet on his face. He could feel her hands and her lips.

"You'll be all right, Cadmus," she said as her hands caressed his face. "As long as it didn't get your heart."

Cadmus looked at her hungrily.

"I managed to hide for a while," she said, "when we fled from Consar's palace. I heard that terrible explosion. Later I heard Johlan's voice from the Tower and I came here. I didn't know, until I overheard him talking to you, what had really happened." Her voice broke. "How could he have been—so fiendish—so—"

"Forget it," he murmured. "Or try to anyway. We did it. The Machine's gone."

"Yes." A glitter of faith shone in her eyes. "The System's free again. Free to evolve and grow, and reach greatness or ruin. But at least to be free."

"Zaleel—Where do we go—from here?"

"We're going again, and that's what really matters," she said. "It's us now, Cadmus. It'll be just you and me now for a while. Remember?"

Cadmus remembered.

VENUS HATE

By JOHN MCGREEVEY

She was joy. She was death. She was part of the Desert Rouge—and the desert blotted out her sins.

WHEN the patrol found her it was impossible to say how long she had been in the humidi-hut alone. She was incoherent but, as Morrissey observed, most Venusians are.

Not that Selo was an ordinary Venusian woman. Even in her madness, as she babbled to the patrol about red dust devils and punctured thermiteens, there was a haunting beauty about her. Those deep-set violet eyes, the blue-black hair, the shapely, well-rounded body—easy to understand why an earthman might be hypnotized by such a woman.

At first she was passive. Their questions made no impression upon her. She nodded her head absently and gestured vaguely toward the vac-lock that led to the dust-tortured world outside. Once or twice, Morrissey thought he heard her mutter Yancey's name but he couldn't be sure. Her speech was a confused mixture of English and the indecipherable polyglot of Venus.

The simplest solution seemed to be to take Selo back to Athens where technicians could subdue her hysteria and perhaps eventually draw the whole tragic story from her paralyzed mind.

Morrissey wouldn't have admitted it to any of the members of his patrol, but he found the woman's manner disconcerting. She stared at the vac-lock as though she momentarily expected Yancey to appear there. So intense was the stare that if Morrissey hadn't seen Yancey Ritter's desiccated body himself, he could have believed that the woman had second sight.

Her passivity was abruptly shattered when they tried to get ready for the trip. She clawed and bit like a mad animal as they struggled to slip the plasti-shield over her shoulders.

"Let me die as Brian died!" she wailed. "I do not want to live without him. You cannot make me live."

"Hey, captain," a panting patrolman shouted, "what do we do with her?"

"Put that plasti-shield on her. Tie it if you have to. She's not to go through that vac-lock without it."

The frenzy that had seized Selo seemed to subside as quickly as it began. She permitted them to make the plasti-shield secure. Her face, through the greenish-gray mask, had the texture and shading of a corpse. Zombie-like, she had lost all individuality.

"Check your thermiteens," Morrissey snapped to the patrol, "and let's get out of this place."

The men quickly filled their light-weight thermiteens with water from the supply in the humidi-hut, fastened their own plasti-shields securely over head and shoulders, put on their asbesti-mittens and stepped into the vac-lock.

Sixty seconds later, the party stood in the weird, dust-filled world outside. A hot wind pressed its dusty fingers against their protective hoods and tugged with an eerie persuasiveness at their padded jackets. Through the murk an orange sun burned in the sand-strewn sky. Rocks pitted and pocked from centuries of relentless persecution stood stark sentinel on every side. This was Venus.

Walking slightly behind Selo, shoulders hunched, head down, Morrissey worried the enigma of this strange Venusian woman and the two men who had known her. Two men—now both dead—wind-dried mummies fallen in the wastes of the Desert Rouge.

Victims of the desert, Morrissey wondered, or victims of a woman with deep-set violet eyes and blue-black hair.

THE Earth colonies on Venus, Mars and the satellites of Jupiter are filled with men like Yancey Ritter. They're men who



seem to be born with a weight of bitterness on their backs. They look at the Universe early in life and decide that things are set against them—that they are the persecuted and misunderstood. You've heard them talking in bars.

"If I just had a chance I'd make it. I just never get the breaks."

Yancey Ritter said that a thousand times in his life. He said it when he was prospecting for brakion on Mars, when he tried lumbering on Europa, and finally, when he took the assignment to the humidihut on Venus.

That job, of course, was to be only a stepping stone. When Yancey wasn't preoccupied with the relatively simple routine of maintaining the humidihut he planned to search for quollas. The edge of the desert rouge, near the humidihut to which Yancey had been assigned, was reputed to be an ideal locale for such a search.

The quolla, an amazingly beautiful gem burnished to a glowing loveliness by the wind and sand, brought an increasingly fancy price in the jewel markets of the System. A few sizeable finds and Yancey would have a little capital with which to work. Given fifty thousand credits he was certain that he could, in time, become one of the really big investors on Venus.

Such projects always assumed a false simplicity in Yancey's mind. Aboard the space tramp that brought him to Athens his sudden rise to power and position seemed quite feasible. But when he gazed out across the tortured wastes of the Desert Rouge he felt a momentary tremor of doubt.

Such spasms passed quickly. Like most men of his temperament Yancey compensated for the failures of past and present with roseate dreams of the future. Now, it appeared, that future was at hand.

The commandant in Athens was brutally frank.

"It would appear to me, Ritter," he said wryly, "that tenacity is not one of your cardinal virtues."

Yancey cleared his throat. He was trying hard not to be impressed by the commandant's office, the commandant's ribbons, the commandant's manner. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

The big man tapped the papers on his desk with a stubby finger. "Governmental

service on Earth . . . mining on Mars . . . lumbering on Europa . . . and now, an assignment on Venus. Not the record of a stable personality."

Yancey was bewildered. What was the commandant saying? Wasn't he to get the post? The dream of a fortune in quollas flickered. "I—I've been looking for work that would really challenge me, sir"

The gaze was direct. "Challenge you. That's an interesting answer, Ritter. So you think that assignment to a humidihut in the vicinity of the Desert Rouge will awaken your latent and heretofore unexplored potentials?"

Was the man laughing at him? Even in the carefully conditioned room, Yancey felt the beads of perspiration settling on his forehead. "If I was just given a chance," he said, seizing on the familiar cliché. "I know I can please the commandant."

A sigh escaped the big man. "Pleasing me is irrelevant. Keeping that humidihut operating is vital. Do you realize, Ritter, that since we established our chain of humidihuts on Venus we've reduced our mortality rate thirty per cent?"

A nod seemed to be all that was required from Yancey.

"I just want you to realize that the job you're taking can't be abandoned one fine morning when you're seized with a whim to go to Saturn."

"I tell you, sir, I think I've found what I want here. You needn't have no worries about me leaving the service." Yancey felt better. He was back on solid ground. The old man was afraid he'd leave without notice. They were all alike. No matter where you went—Earth, Mars, Europa, Venus—employers were always worried about being left in a spot.

"Human lives depended upon your efficiency, Ritter. Earthmen can only endure so much of this Venusian heat and dust, then we dehydrate. It's up to you to see to it that your station is always alert to the needs of any one in your sector."

Words—only words. Yancey's mind was far away, searching the dust of the Desert Rouge for the beautiful quolla stones.

"You'll be paid three hundred credits a month and living expenses. I might add, Ritter, that the station you're getting is one of the most important in the entire chain."

Three hundred credits! And, with a little luck, Yancey thought, he could find quollas worth a hundred times as much.

"There'll be a patrol to escort you to the station and I think you'd better plan to leave at once." There was a small pause as the commandant regarded Yancey closely. "I hope," he said at last, "that neither of us is making a mistake, Ritter."

Yancey stood up, shook hands with the commandant, and the interview was ended.

MORRISSEY headed the patrol which escorted Yancey to his new post. Yancey took an almost immediate dislike to the broad-shouldered young space militiaman. There was about Morrissey that air of quiet positiveness which Yancey found impossible to bear.

Throughout the long and tiresome march from Athens to the humidi-hut this unreasoning resentment of Morrissey grew. The yielding, insubstantial dust underfoot, the eye-watering furnace glare in the sky, the desiccating heat that seemed to dry up the marrow in a man's bones—all this, through some inexplicable subconscious juggling, became Morrissey's fault.

Inside the comparative comfort of the plasti-shield, Yancey Ritter looked at the raw redness that stretched around, above and below him, and wondered what perverse fate had drawn him to this ultimate debacle here on the dust-clouded Desert Rouge. For the first time in his life Yancey knew the bowel-rending terror of utter desolation.

The spectre of thirst hovered in the orange and yellow dust clouds ahead. Crazed rocks, scarred and wind-broken, leered at him like blind prophets wordlessly screaming their dire predictions.

Morrissey was at last forced to take his thermite away from him. He sobbed and pleaded for water. He swore that his tongue was swollen with thirst, that his body was dehydrated. He cursed Morrissey . . . the desert . . . the service . . . his own ill fortune. He made his will, he resigned from the service, he called upon God to avenge his death at the sands of the heartless Morrissey. And finally, after two days on the pitiless griddle of the Desert Rouge, he was half-carried through the vac-lock at the humidi-hut.

Only his hatred for Morrissey made him stay. Every instinct told him to return to Athens with the patrol. Let the commandant hire some other fool to stay there in the midst of the desert, supplying succor for those who were stupid enough to face the rigors of the hell outside. Instinct warned him to leave but hatred forced him to stay. The contempt in Morrissey's eyes permitted him no alternative. The patrol left and Yancey stayed in the humidi-hut.

The first few days were a nightmare. He seemed in a waking dream. Hour upon hour he simply sat and stared at the precious machinery that kept temperature and humidity at ideal levels. Every few minutes he would half-run to check the water supply, touch the water to his lips, anxiously work the controls to be certain that nothing had jammed.

Every second was filled with but one preoccupation: What would happen if the machinery failed?

But the machinery performed in its precise and unhurried way, and from its dependability, he began to draw a degree of confidence. He had let the orange hell outside unnerve him. One could almost think that particles of the wind-driven dust had penetrated his mind and prevented its proper functioning.

Why should he be apprehensive? Hadn't everything worked out exactly as he had planned? The job was his. He had the security of three hundred credits a month and a perfect opportunity to search for quolla stones. The superior attitude of that captain—what was his name—Morrissey—had momentarily shaken his resolve. Now, Morrissey was gone. The time for huddling inside was over. The sooner the quolla stones were his, the sooner he could leave the humidi-hut, make the sort of life he had always wanted for himself in Athens.

Yancey didn't take risks. The first few excursions, he made from the humidi-hut were within a radius of fifty yards of his headquarters. Gradually, as he became more accustomed to his plasti-shield, to the murk of the world outside, he grew bolder and bolder. He made several trips to replenish the cache of water half-way between the humidi-hut and Athens. He became very clever in establishing land-marks for himself and he found that with practice, his

endurance lengthened. He could go much longer without a drink from his thermiteen and the wind no longer drained him of all vitality.

A little more than a month after Morrissey left him at the humidi-hut, Yancey found his first quolla stone. It wasn't a large one, and it was far from perfect, but for Yancey it seemed the good omen he needed. The quolla stones were there to be found. With a little perseverance he could make the rest of his dream come true.

The one inescapable hazard of Yancey's life was the loneliness. Visitors to the station were few, an occasional patrol of space militia, a prospector, or a party of geologists. The days and nights between were long and empty. Yancey would sit polishing the lone quolla stone he had found, wondering if he could stick it out until he had accumulated enough to carry out his long range scheme.

Often, as he groped through the constant veil of orange dust in his search for the gems, he would imagine that there was someone waiting for him at the station, someone to whom he could talk of the difficulties he had faced, someone who could share, perhaps, the dream he held. But, when he passed through the vac-lock, there would be no one—only the monotonous purr of the machinery.

Despite this, when Yancey took the week's leave to visit Athens, he had no idea that he was to meet someone there—that he would not return to the station alone.

YOU must understand the position of the Venusian women to appreciate the thing that happened with Yancey and Selo.

From the time of the first settlement, fraternization had been frowned upon. No one expected earthmen, twenty-six million miles from home, to ignore the more attractive of the Venusian women. But very few permanent alliances were formed. Militiamen might wink at a buxom beauty, might even invite her caresses to while away a long Venusian night, but with the sunrise she must return to her appointed place in the scheme of things colonial.

Selo was a waitress in one of the cheap Venusian restaurants that dotted the boundary between the old city of Athens and the new. Her uncle, a vicious-looking old fel-

low with beetling brows, broken nose and protruding teeth, was the proprietor of the place, and, in his unoccupied moments, which were many, he did what he could to make life miserable for the girl.

The moment that Yancey saw her he felt a quickening of his desire. The girl was young. Not more than seventeen or eighteen earth years of age, and despite her wretched clothes she had a distinctive kind of beauty. She lived in constant fear of her uncle, doing her heavy work in the restaurant with the deft but lifeless efficiency of an automaton.

It was apparent to Yancey that it was only a matter of time until someone recognized the girl's potentials and took her away. He could find no reason why he shouldn't be her discoverer.

She was terribly frightened and shy at first. That an earthling should be kind to her seemed beyond her comprehension. Then, once she saw Yancey was serious in his advances, she was certain her uncle would find her out and punish her.

On the fourth night of his visit to Athens, Yancey persuaded Selo to meet him after the restaurant closed. When she slipped furtively out of the shadows to seek haven in his arms he knew that he could not return to the humidi-hut alone. With this woman to care for him he could search for the quollas with new eagerness. She would put an end to the terrible loneliness.

Of course, he told Selo nothing of what he was actually thinking. If he had she would have been much too terrified to understand. He promised to be kind to her and to protect her from any attempt by her uncle to punish her. He told her briefly of the humidi-hut, of the good food, the nice clothes.

In the end, however, it was not so much the good things Yancey promised as the bad things she had suffered which brought Selo to her decision. Life in the restaurant of her uncle had become unbearable. An escape was offered by an earthling. Earthlings very seldom offered Venusian women such security. She promised to go with him.

Yancey was never sure how the commandant learned of his arrangement with Selo. News travels quickly in the Earth Colony at Athens. No doubt the commandant had his spies. Whatever his methods,

he knew—and he was displeased.

"I was beginning to think, Ritter," he said, "that I was mistaken—that you were going to serve us well."

Yancey hated the big man for making him feel like a small boy. "I can't see that my taking Selo with me will interfere with my work, sir," he stammered.

The Commandant snorted. "You're making two mistakes. You're aligning yourself with a Venusian. And you're taking a woman to an isolated humidi-hut. I can't order you not to do this, Ritter. You're within your rights. But I am asking you to reconsider." The tone was surprisingly conciliatory.

Yancey shook his head. "I can't go back on my word now, sir. She's counting on it, and frankly, so am I. There won't be no trouble with her, I can promise you that. I'll be able to do an even better job if I'm not so lonely out there."

There was a little pause before the Commandant stood and faced Ritter across the desk. "As I said, I have no authority to forbid your taking the woman with you. I can quite understand that loneliness is a fearful thing. But I've also learned in my stay here, Ritter, that there are other pressures of even greater intensity."

Yancey avoided the calm gray eyes of his superior. "You don't know Selo, sir. She's different."

And on that note the interview was concluded.

ON THE nightmare trip back to the humidi-hut, Selo was sturdily self-reliant. In fact, on several occasions when the shifting dust made footing insecure, she came to Yancey's assistance. It was Selo who found the auxiliary water cache, one day's journey from the humidi-hut, and led Yancey to it when he had lost the trail. Nature seemed to have equipped Selo for the environmental hazards of the Desert Rouge.

In the early days of their life at the humidi-hut, Yancey worked constantly to convince himself that things were as he had imagined they would be. Certainly Selo was a tireless worker. Her only concern was his comfort. Nonetheless, she was, he decided after two months, a wonderful servant, but no companion.

Her attitude toward Yancey was depressingly similar to that she had toward her uncle, the restaurant owner. This was a strange mixture of respect and fear. And, at times, as he sat alone with her through an endless evening, it came to Yancey that there was also an element of hate.

He found two more small quolla stones, but Selo failed to share his enthusiasm for the gems. She regarded them with a stolid indifference. He remembered that the Venusians placed no value on the stones.

The accumulation of the fortune in quolla stones was not moving at quite the pace he had imagined. The jewels, it appeared, were not to be found in large quantities. They must be painfully searched out in the remotest, most wind-tortured sections of the Desert Rouge.

Succumbing to the usual fit of despondency, Yancey was toying with the notion of abandoning the whole project—returning Selo to Athens and taking a space tramp back to earth—when Brian Daniels stumbled into the humidi-hut.

There had been no visitors in more than three weeks. Daily, Selo's defiant passivity rankled more and more. Having abused her verbally and physically for an hour on that particular day, Yancey had stormed out into the murk and spent a frustrating afternoon in his futile search for quollas.

He staggered back through the veil of red dust, cursing his rotten luck, cursing Selo, cursing Venus and the twisted destiny that had brought him there. Since Venus and destiny were more or less impervious, he had determined to relieve his frustration by beating Selo.

A fine frenzy had been achieved when he stepped through the vac-lock and saw her. She was sitting on the floor with a stranger's head cradled in her lap. The stranger was making light moaning noises and Selo was soothing him with a little crooning sound as she forced water between his blistered lips.

Yancey's fine anger was lost. "Where did he come from?" he growled, towering over Selo and the stranger.

"He is a prospector. He lost his way. Another few hours on the desert and he would die."

Yancey stared down at the stranger. Despite the terribly blistered face, the stubble

of a beard, the matted hair, it was apparent that this Earthman was handsome beyond the ordinary. The features were beautifully modeled—eyes set wide apart, generous mouth, firm chin. And, there was also something intangible about the stranger that troubled Yancey. It was an air of quiet self-possession that refused to be denied even while he was in semi-coma. This was a man who had been given by nature all the qualities Yancey Ritter most prized and least possessed.

In the days that followed, Selo never left Brian Daniels' side. It was as if all her life she had waited for someone upon whom she could lavish such care. She nursed him not so much out of his need as out of her own. Yancey's bitter, jealous remarks failed to touch her.

Under such care, Brian recovered quickly and he seemed to find in Selo a something for which he, too, had long sought. In the few days of his convalescence they achieved the sort of communion that Yancey had dreamed of when he had first brought Selo to the humidi-hut.

Yancey's conversations with Brian were brief and charged with hate. Daniels had been prospecting for quolla stones. He was on his way back to Athens and had lost his bearings. Only the humidi-hut had saved him from death. When he spoke to Yancey, he seemed always anxious to return to Selo, a preoccupation that only deepened the seething hatred Yancey had conceived for him.

More than once, Yancey ordered Selo to keep out of Brian's way but it was the same as if no words were spoken. In the unfaltering stare of those deep-set eyes, Yancey read her open defiance. So desperate was her need for Brian that nothing short of death could keep her from him.

Nothing short of death.

YANCEY viewed that possibility. Murder in such a remote place would be easy but what was to be gained? Selo certainly wouldn't love him more if he killed the prospector. Another consideration was Daniels' build. He was a well-muscled man and, being fully recovered, was something less than the ideal murder victim.

And then Yancey found out about the quolla stones—quite by accident. He had

gone out on a routine check of the vicinity and had turned back earlier than usual. As he stepped through the vac-lock he saw Selo and Brian huddled in earnest conversation. So engrossed were they, they failed to hear the asthmatic wheeze of the lock. Yancey stood a long time silently watching them.

On the table before the two was a glittering pile of the most beautiful quolla stones Yancey had ever seen. Dozens of them. A small fortune lying quietly on that table in the humidi-hut. Here were the black stones that Yancey had dreamed of finding. Here was the answer to all his hopes.

But the answer lay in another man's hands, the hands that now caressed Selo!

"I won't be long in Athens," Brian was saying. "There's at least sixty or seventy thousand credits worth of quolla stones there. I'll take what they'll offer me in the market, Selo, and then I'll come back for you."

The woman pressed closer to Daniels. "Don't leave me here even for a little while—with him."

Brian's arms went around her. "This is the best way, Selo. He'll make trouble. It's not going to be pleasant. Let me get rid of the stones first and then you and I can start out together."

She buried her face in his chest. "I'm so afraid—here alone with him."

Brian tilted her chin up to space him. "There's no reason to be afraid of him. I know his kind. He only talks about things he could do. He won't hurt you. He wouldn't dare."

They were lost in each other's arms as Yancey turned and silently slipped back through the vac-lock. When he noisily re-entered a half hour later his plans were made.

If Brian was surprised by Yancey's sudden change in attitude, he gave no indication. He accepted Yancey's solicitous interest as lightly as he had his surly resentment earlier.

Dinner, the evening before Brian was to set out for Athens, was an hilarious affair on the surface. Yancey insisted on toasting Brian, on exacting a promise that he would come back to visit them. He assured the prospector that they would miss him and that he must consider the humidi-hut his home when he was on Venus.

Brian seemed to accept Yancey's protestations as genuine. Selo regarded her husband with quiet suspicion.

The next morning Yancey made all the preparations for Brian's departure. He had painstakingly drawn a detailed map of the route to Athens. He personally chose a new plasti-shield to protect Brian from the pelting of the dust and sand. Finally he filled the two thermiteens with their precious supply of water.

Finishing up this last chore in the little lab which housed the water supply, he smiled to himself, for he knew that Brian was using his absence from the living-room to pay Selo a fond farewell.

Only as the vac-lock closed on Brian and the indicator showed them he had left the humidi-hut did Yancey relax. He leaned against the door and smiled at Selo.

"So," he half-whispered, "your lover's gone. But he promised you that he'd come back for you, didn't he? Didn't he?"

For a moment Selo met his gaze. Then, she turned and started toward the kitchen.

"I wouldn't leave just yet," he taunted. "I wouldn't leave until you hear why he isn't coming back for you. Doesn't that interest you?"

SHE stopped, not turning, her back rigid. "I thought you'd change your mind," Yancey went on. "I thought you'd like to know why you can't count on seeing Mr. Brian Daniels again."

He laughed, and the sound was like a bad smell in the close little hut. "The thermiteens are punctured," he giggled. "The water your lover needs is already evaporated. When he wants it, in three or four hours, those thermiteens won't even be moist. He won't be able to keep on to the auxiliary cache. And he won't be able to come back here."

She was moving toward him. "You saw the quollas. You're killing him to get the jewels."

"That's only part of it," he countered savagely. "He deserved to die for many reasons."

With the quick grace of a Martian feline, she started to slip past him to the vac-lock. He caught her arm and twisted it behind her back. She cried out in pain, struggling with a ferocity he hadn't expected. After a

moment he succeeded in throwing her to the floor.

"You can't save him," he panted. "Nothing can save him. You're going to sit here with me, Selo, and wait for the desert to kill your lover." Again he laughed. "It won't take long."

All that day and night they watched each other. And the time dragged by, Yancey's excitement increased. Selo, on the other hand, seemed to shrink within herself. It was almost as if in contemplating Brian's death she was dying herself.

Shortly after noon the next day, Yancey set out from the humidi-hut with four thermiteens. Two were full of water and two were empty.

He found Brian's body a little more than an hour's walk from the humidi-hut. Obviously, the prospector had discovered the punctured thermiteens and started back, but the desert moved in for its kill. He had crawled into the shelter of a pile of twisted rock, and with the punctured thermiteens in one hand and the quolla stones in the other, he had died.

Quickly, Yancey substituted the two empty but sound thermiteens he had brought with him for the tell-tale murder-tins. The quolla stones he dropped into the pocket of his asbesticoat.

With a final glance at the shrivelled thing that had once been Brian Daniels, he turned back to the humidi-hut.

He could feel Selo's eyes upon him that evening as he sat polishing the quolla stones. Each time he glanced up from his work she was staring at him.

"Selo," he said at last, continuing his work with the stones, "I hope you're not thinking of revenge."

She made no answer.

"If you ever went to the authorities with your wild story you'd be put in prison for the rest of your life. I'd see to that. No one would take the word of a Venusian against that of an Earthman."

She only stared at the floor.

Carefully, he deposited the gleaming quolla stones in the chamois bag he had bought for just this happy moment.

"Brian Daniels never reached this humidi-hut. Understand? Never reached it. We found him out there, poor fellow, but there was nothing we could do for him. That's

the story. Is it clear?"

Her voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"It's clear."

"I'm going to Athens. I'll sell these quolla stones. In good time we'll leave this place. We might even go to another planet. How would you like that, Selo?"

Each word fell with the precision of a stone into water. "That would be very nice."

He rose and walked over to her. "In time, you'll forget him." It was not a positive statement. It was a half-question, as if Yancey were admitting that this was no more than a wish on his part.

Surprisingly, she nodded. "He will be forgotten," she answered.

This was an unexpected victory. It so pleased Yancey that he made her a present of one of the smaller quolla stones as a token of their new understanding.

She was very good to him that night.

YANCEY could scarcely wait to be off the following morning. This day would stand out in bold relief against all the gray, futile days of his past. This was the day that would see the beginning of a new and happier life for Yancey Ritter.

Selo helped him make ready and listened with unusual attentiveness to all his instructions. He had his plasti-shield? Yes. The two thermiteens she had filled? Yes. The chamois bag with the quolla stones? Of course.

She permitted him to kiss her and then stood watching as he stepped toward the vac-lock.

Abruptly he turned and stood, hands on his hips, laughing at her. It was a hollow, mirthless, mocking laughter.

"You fool," he roared. "You stupid little fool of a woman. Did you think you could kill ME—Yancey Ritter—with the same trick I used on Daniels? Giving me these punctured thermi-teens!" He threw them with a crash at her feet and stepped threateningly toward her.

"Yancey," she cried, and his heavy fist caught her on the side of the head and sent her sprawling to the floor.

"You don't fool me," he said, looking at her. "I'm not a blind fool like Daniels. This is my round to win and I won't be

stopped." He turned and strode into the lab for fresh thermiteens.

She was still sprawled in the same spot when he returned. "I'm not finished with you," he snarled. "We'll finish the payment when I get back from Athens."

And with that he disappeared into the vac-lock.

Resolutely, he strode through the flying dust, eyes set on the orange orb that was the sun. A slow steady gait, he had found, was the most practical way to cover distance in the shifting blood dust of the Desert Rouge.

As the morning advanced, the winds that drove the sand seemed to increase in their elemental fury. The sun was all but blotted out and the dust swirled and eddied in an orange and red kaleidoscope. It was as if some giant stood and threw great fistfuls of choking sand at Yancey.

He touched the cool water in the thermiteen to his lips often and each time he drank he half-laughed aloud, remembering the disappointment on Selo's face when she saw her trick was discovered.

He skirted wide around the rocks where he had found Brian. No reason to spoil the day by a second glimpse of that grisly sight.

Once or twice it seemed to him that he was being followed but he dismissed the notion as nerves.

Perhaps, he thought, it's Daniels' ghost. And with a harsh laugh he toasted Daniels' ghost in the cool water. He toasted Selo and the commandant and the quolla merchant who would soon give him a fortune for the stones in the chamois bag.

The wind clawed at him with gritty fingers and his boots seemed to sink deeper and deeper into the yielding dust. Every step was an effort and he could feel the slow encroachment of dehydration.

At the auxiliary water cache he promised himself he would use a little of the water to dampen his face.

He finished the last of his water in the thermiteens about nine hours after he had left the humidi-hut. He had drunk more than usual but he decided that his thirst had been aggravated by the storm.

The familiar marker that stood guard over the auxiliary water supply loomed through the shifting murk. He half ran

the last few yards, feeling already the soothing coolness of the dampened cloth against his fevered cheek.

He stopped a few paces from the water cache and stared.

The door of the little thermi-safe stood open and there in the drifting dust lay the emptied auxiliary water kegs.

He threw himself to the ground and seized one of the emptied containers. The dust around it was still moist. Someone, short minutes ago, had broken into this cache and deliberately emptied the water into the dust. Someone . . .

"Selo!" he half-screamed and staggered to his feet. "Selo," he cried, and remembered his sense of being followed.

Was it the wind among the tortured rocks, or did he hear a high-pitched woman's laugh?

"Selo," he shouted, "I didn't mean to hit you! Selo, you've got to help me!"

THE VIZIGRAPH (From Page 3)

to judge the quality of an artist on the work he did in his apprenticeship. I do believe those early stories were good, but they were good because Bradbury has genius. To make the point clearer I will simply say that he has developed a great deal since then from the standpoint of originality.

Secondly, almost all of Bradbury's work has appeared in science-fiction and fantasy magazines, the bulk of them in science-fiction mags. Now although Bradbury is what we might call an innovator, still that material had to be S-F or fantasy. This naturally overbalances his output far towards a fantastic nature. But what of non-fantasy? What of stories like *THE POWERHOUSE*, *I SEE YOU NEVER*, and *THE BIG BLACK AND WHITE GAME*? These are among the finest stories Bradbury has produced. Before anyone called him a great writer I should think they would want to wait until more stories of this nature appeared. (For the record, let me say that I also consider *THE ILLUSTRATED MAN* a fantasy, as one of his best. I am referring to the *ESQUIRE* story, not the book of the same name.)

I personally think Bradbury is a writer of quality, but would not call him great by any means . . . yet. To his admirers I would give caution not to become blind to his faults. To those who find him "too morbid" I would advise reading his radio play *THE NIGHT WATCHMAN*—a beautiful and idealistic piece of writing.

I had meant to remark on S. Vernon McDaniel's statements about "art for art's sake, but it appears that this letter is overlong already.

Yours truly,

MORTON D. PALBY

DISAPPEARANCE OF PREVIOUS EDS DUE TO SPACE BLIGHT

Dear Sir:

This is my second letter to you this month, but I

Silence.

He began to run.

Exhausted as he was, he must have run for nearly an hour before the unbearable burden of his thirst pushed him down into the granular cushion of the Desert Rouge. A million orange and red parasites clustered on his body and drew out the last drop of his vitality.

Morrissey sighed and stepped closer to the Venusian woman. He felt sure that the clever technicians in Athens would get no story from her.

Two accidental deaths. That would be the verdict.

Morrissey took Selo's arm as she half-stumbled in the shifting dust.

Two men dead—wind-dried mummies fallen in the wastes of the Desert Rouge.

Victims of the desert? Or victims of a woman with deep-set violet eyes and blue-black hair?

feel that I must warn you and inform fandom of the probable fate of poor old Bixby.

Gad man, do you realize what has happened to you? As Bixl said (and I shall tend to quote) in the summer 1950 ish—"Some four years ago (that would be six years, now) a man named Whitehorn, then acting as editor of *PLANET Stories*, contracted virus *scientifictionists*. With soft giggles he fell to tinkering with his typewriter, telling all who queried him that he was building a "psycometric transsubstantiator." Whatever the foul machine was, it suddenly erupted in a blue flash, and nothing has been seen of the poor man since.

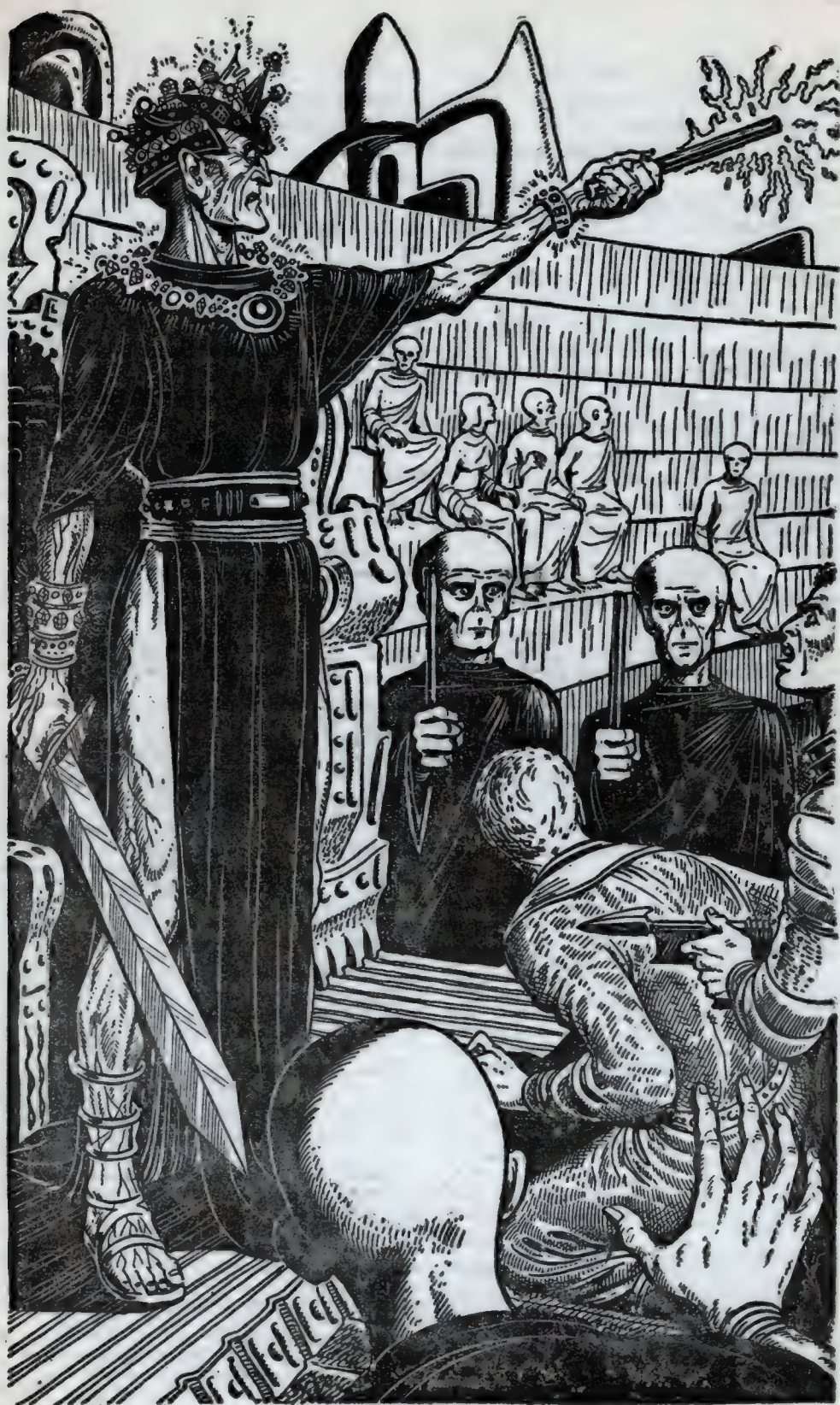
"Once again this tragedy has struck within our sacred precincts. One Paul Payne, inheriting the chair and mantle of PS editorship, was lately seen making strange motions at his desk. He would vouchsafe no explanation, but the motions resembled those peculiar to manipulating wrench, screwdriver, and micrometer.

"Then the spectacle took a grisly turn. Payne's right arm was no longer visible! It just—*wasn't*! Then the left leg above the knee disappeared. Payne seemed at ease, but we hardly dared to look. Gradually, bit by bit, member by member, he—*went*—somewhere.

"Finally, we had to face the fact that there was no longer anybody—as we understand the term, 'body'—at Payne's desk.

"Then it was that I knew the true horror! For eyes turned to me, hands fell upon me and I was dragged, screaming through the halls and flung down in *THAT* chair, before *THAT* desk—and chains were brought, shackling me forever to this post of unguessable evil . . ."

And there you have the true statement from poor Bixl's own tortured lips. There are those who hint darkly throughout fandom that the stories I sent him did it . . . this is not true! I have an invisible BEM friend who spys on the editors for me. (Crawl out of
(Continued on page 106)





When the Spoilers Came

A Startling Novelet by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

So they came to the Holy City of Sudal, primed for loot and murder! Larkin, the old Terran trader, warned them. But there was no convincing these space-scarred Pizarros that the simple, dream-bound Martians were not quite as defenseless as they seemed.

TO STAY alive five years on Mars, you have to have a nose for trouble. You have to be able to smell it before it happens, to catch the oderiferous tang of

it in the dry wind blowing across the red deserts, to sense it in the shifting shadows of the sunset. Otherwise you may not stay alive on Mars for five months let alone five

years. Or for five days, if you happen to be in the wrong place.

Boyd Larkin had lived seven years on Mars, in the wrongest of all wrong places on the red planet, the city of Sudal. No other earth trader ever even ventured here. In view of the peculiarity of the Martian customs, few traders found it wise to attempt to operate on Mars at all.

The City of Sudal was noted for several reasons. In a way, it was the holy city of Mars. Here also were to be found a few lingering relics of the vast scientific achievement this race had once known and had forgotten in the hard struggle for life across the centuries. Here also was a ruler by the name of Malovar, who, within the framework of Martian law and custom, was an utter despot. The reputation of Malovar alone was sufficient to keep most traders away from Sudal.

This, in itself, was enough to bring Boyd Larkin here.

He stood in the door of this store—it had once been the wing of a temple—just before the hour of sunset. A vague uneasiness was in him, a presentiment of trouble. His eyes went over the city, searching for the stimulus that had aroused the feeling in him. The peaked roofs of the buildings of the city glistened peacefully in the rays of the setting sun. Peaked roofs here on this world of no-rain always struck him as odd but he knew these roofs were relics of the far-gone centuries when rain had fallen plentifully on Mars.

Beyond the city lay the desert with its fretwork of canals and its pathetic patches of green growth, pathetic because where once grain had grown as far as the eye could reach now only a few patches were under cultivation. It was not the failure of the soil or of the water that made the desert bare. This soil would still grow lush vegetation. But the grains, though lush, would be worthless, incapable of supporting life. The minerals had been virtually exhausted from the top soil of Mars.

Without minerals, the grain did not support life.

The breeze that came in from the red deserts was soft and peaceful, with no trace of danger in it, no howl of a devil dog from the desert's brim, no chirrrr of a winged horde of locusts coming to devour

the crops.

Where, then, was the source of his feeling of danger?

Had Malovar begun to doubt him? Was the Martian ruler considering what action he might take at the next time of the testing? At the thought, a slight shudder passed over the tall trader as if the desert wind had suddenly become tinged with a trace of bitter chill. No, that could hardly be the source of the trouble he sensed. He was no telepath, he could not read Martian minds, nor they his.

What then was the source of the trouble that he sensed?

FROM inside the store a soft voice called out, "*Send motan.*"

Larkin went inside. The Martian had entered by the side door. He was tall and slender, with a big chest and a skin the color of old copper. His features were finely moulded, the face of a dreaming esthetic. In one hand he held a jewel, one of the Martian opals, uncut. At a glance Larkin knew that this opal was worth approximately seventy dollars delivered on Earth.

In the other hand the Martian held a list which he was turning in nervous, uncertain fingers.

"Yes, Seekin?" Larkin said.

The Martian smiled. A little uncertainly he pushed the list across the counter.

"I do not need all of these for me and mine, but the ground is prepared and ready, and if I have these minerals I will be able to grow more than I need. Then there will be something over for someone else to use in the time of scarcity." His voice was as soft as a breeze, there was no hint of a demand in it. But there was a pleading in the eyes that looked at the human.

Larkin took the list. Rapidly translating the Martian script, he saw that Seekin wanted approximately five grams of powdered cobalt, copper, boron, manganese, with traces of iron, zinc, and calcium. Phosphorus also was included and a smattering of trace elements.

The trader went quickly to the bins and filled the order, tossing the correct amount of the powdered elements into the agitator for mixing. He spun the crank of the agitator and the machine hummed softly.

The powdered minerals poured from the spout. He bagged the mixture. His practiced eye told him that the cost of these minerals, delivered here on Mars, was approximately two hundred dollars.

The Martian's eyes became fixed longly on the little bag when Larkin laid it on the counter. There was an eagerness in the eyes that was almost as strong as the eagerness for life itself. But there was uncertainty too. He fumbled with the opal.

"This is all we have," he said.

Larkin grinned. "It's odd, isn't it, how things achieve a balance? Those minerals come to just exactly the price of this jewel."

A glow lit the Martian's face. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course."

"But—"

"Take the minerals, give me the opal. It is a fair trade."

On Seekin's face appeared a glow that was like the light of the rising sun. He clutched the bag of minerals to his chest.

"Thank you, my friend. This will be remembered." Turning, he went out the door. On the verbal level his thanks had not been profuse, but the glow on his face had exhibited another kind of thanks, to Larkin a much more important kind.

Larkin felt some of the inner glow within him that had appeared on the Martian's face. The minerals he had practically given away would be spread on some little patch of irrigated land, spread with all the care and saving thought that alert minds and hands educated for centuries in extracting the last trace of food value from unwilling soil could bestow. The grain would be eaten by Seekin and his family. They would feel a new throb of life within them as mineral-hungry tissues took up and utilized the earth elements down to the last molecule. And there would be something left over for somebody else in the time of need. Larkin especially liked that.

A warm glow flooding through him, Larkin went again to the door of his store. He lit his pipe and stood there contentedly smoking, a tall, angular Earthman who had wandered from his native planet for a reason that he considered sufficient. Except for two articles for scientific journals, dealing with the problem of supplying minerals

to the top-soil of Mars and the vast need for such mineral fertilizer, he had had no contact with Earth in seven years. Nor did he anticipate that he would ever again see Earth, or anyone from that planet, except possibly a rare, far-wandering trader like himself. There was peace in Boyd Larkin.

But there was trouble in the air.

His ears caught the far-off drum-fire of rockets.

He felt his pulse pick up. A ship was coming.

Instantly he knew the source of his feeling of coming trouble. He had heard the sound of those far-off rockets long before he was aware of it as sub-liminal ranges of sound penetrated to his inner being. That sound had been the stimulus for the feeling of trouble that had arisen in him.

A ship, men, humans, were coming.

Wherever humans were, there was trouble.

II

"THE fools!" he thought. "What do they want here?"

He watched the ship land in a fury of splashing jets, just outside the city, but he did not go to it. He was not in a mood to see his fellowmen. They would come to him in the morning, searching out the lone human in this Martian city. He did not think he would wait for them. In the morning he would take a trip to some outlying settlement where the need of minerals was great. For a few days he would trade there.

He was sitting in his chair outside his store deciding which of the various Martian villages he would visit in the morning when he saw the three humans approaching through the twilight. Astonished, he rose to his feet. They hadn't waited for the morning. They had come to him now, before night.

Three burly spacemen, big enough and obviously willing to cut a throat or rape a woman, were coming toward him. No Martian guided them but they seemed to know where they were going. They came directly toward him. As they approached, he saw they carried *Kell* guns, the vicious little weapons that spurted a stream of explosive bullets like water out of a hose. The sight of the guns startled him. He had

forgotten that such weapons existed, or that men used them.

He heard the voices of the men as they approached. Harsh, brutal voices, the language all rough consonants. He had forgotten too, the sound of men. The language spoken by the Martians was all soft vowel sounds, gentle words breathed so easily that they seemed to brush only the surface of the aural mechanism and hardly seemed ever to reach the mind beneath.

"There he is!" The men saw him now, came straight toward him.

He rose to his feet. He would greet them politely, like a gentleman, if it killed him.

"You— Are you Larkin?"

"Yes." He advanced with hand outstretched. "Gentlemen, it is certainly a privilege to see you. Won't you come in?" He gestured toward the temple wing that served as his store.

"Naw!" There was no effort at answering politeness in the harsh voice. "We come to get you. Come on with us."

"Come to get me?"

"Yeah. The boss wants you. Mr. Docker."

"I don't believe I know a Mr. Docker. What does he want?"

"To see you. Come along."

Larkin found himself marching ahead of the three men toward the ship that lay at the edge of the city. No Martian made a move to interfere. No Martians were on the streets, none were visible. He did not doubt that they watched him from the windows of the houses along the streets, but they made no effort to inquire what was happening.

What could they do, even if they had wanted to help him? To the best of his knowledge, the only weapons they had were knives.

What were knives against *Kell* guns? Why should the Martians help him, an alien among them?

Docker was a big man with a red face that perpetually showed the red coloration of hidden anger. He had full, thick lips, the avid lips of a greedy man. Whatever these lips tasted or drank, they wanted more of it, all of it. His eyes confirmed his lips. Here was a man who wanted the world with an iron fence around it. Or better still, the solar system, with a big sign saying—KEEP OUT. THIS IS ALL MINE. He looked up

as Larkin entered the cabin, glanced up at the men with him.

"He's clean," one of the men said.

"Okay, you can leave. Set down, Larkin." Docker's eyes went back to the papers on his desk.

Larkin sat down. There seemed nothing else to do. He was very much aware that his situation here was ticklish. Docker finished with the papers. He looked up. His eyes were bold, confident, and arrogant.

"Larkin, we're taking over the distribution of all minerals used for soil enrichment on Mars."

LARKIN felt shock rise in him. He held it under control. His hands clenched into fists. "By whose authority?" His voice had acid in it.

"Whose authority?" For an instant, Docker looked astonished. "Why, Roy said—" He caught himself. The astonishment turned into swift anger which showed as a tide of red creeping over his face. "By our own authority!" His fist pounded on the desk, emphasizing the words.

"You do not have the sanction of the Martian government?"

"What government is there on Mars?" Docker demanded. "The whole cursed planet is split into a hundred different tribes that do not even know the meaning of the word government".

"Yes, I know," Larkin said.

Docker spoke the truth, or part of it. There was no central government on the red planet. Yet there was a central authority, of a sort. It centered here in this city of Sudal, in the person of a despot named Malovar. Larkin did not pretend to understand the system but he knew that far-ranging desert tribes followed Malovar's orders, at least to a degree. Malovar's orders and Martian law and custom.

"What about Earth Government?" Larkin questioned.

"Earth Government can go to hell!" Docker answered. "They have no control over Mars. Why do you bring up such questions? I told you we were taking over distribution of mineral fertilizers on this planet. That's enough authority for you or for anybody else." Again the fist banged on the desk.

Larkin looked at the fist and was silent.

The fist impressed him not at all but the situation did impress him. There was a question he wanted to ask but he was afraid he knew the answer without asking. He started to ask it, then hastily changed his mind.

"How do you know the Martians will buy from you?"

"They buy from you, don't they? They've been buying from you for seven years. They'll buy from us." He sounded very sure of himself, like a man who has a plan all made, a plan which he knows will work.

"Ah!" Larkin sighed and was silent. True, the Martians had bought from him, but there was a price which he had to pay for doing business here, a price which Docker and his men might not relish paying. Larkin tried to imagine the consequences of their refusal to pay that price. His imagination failed him. These Martians had forgotten a great many things that humans had not yet learned. Larkin thought again of the question he wanted to ask, and again put off asking it.

"What prices do you intend to charge for your minerals?"

A grin that had relish in it showed on Docker's face. "Our prices will be fair. Of course, we expect to show a profit."

"Suppose the Martians can't pay your prices?"

"To hell with that!" Docker snorted. "We're not transporting minerals all the way to Mars just to give them away. They'll pay all right. They'll pay or they won't eat." He smacked his lips with obvious relish. A situation in which people paid his prices or did not eat pleased him.

Larkin was silent. There was still the question he did not want to ask. "You seem to have everything worked out to the last detail," he said.

"We have," Docker nodded agreement. "Roy's a genius along those lines." Again he caught himself as if the name had slipped out unintentionally.

Roy? A thought came into Larkin's mind. He put it out. What he was thinking was impossible. He writhed inwardly. He was going to have to ask the question he had tried to avoid.

"Why have you come to me?"

A smile appeared on Docker's face. "Be-

7—PLANET—May

cause you are the only trader who has been able to win the complete confidence of the Martians."

"I see," Larkin said.

"So we have a use for you," Docker continued. "You tell us how you have won the confidence of these Martians and we'll cut you in on the deal. We'll see that you are adequately paid. Any price within reason."

"Ah." Larkin was again silent. "But I thought you indicated that the Martians will have no choice except to deal with you. Under those circumstances why do you need me?"

Docker's smile lost none of its easy sureness. "We prefer to do things the easy way, so nobody gets hurt. Since you are here and know the ground, it'd make sense for you to throw in with us."

"So I am the easy way?" Larkin said.

"Well—"

"You go to hell!" Larkin said. He got to his feet, turned toward the door. Surprisingly, no effort was made to stop him.

"We'll see you in the morning," Docker said.

"It won't do you any good."

Larkin walked out of the ship. No effort was made to stop him. He moved slowly across the desert toward the city.

There was nothing about this situation that he liked. Least of all he liked the fact that Docker seemed to know a lot about him. How could that be? No one on Earth remembered him or knew about him. At the thought, sadness came up in him, replacing the smouldering anger. It would be nice to have someone to stand beside him now, someone fighting shoulder to shoulder with him. The word Roy came into his mind again. He quickly put it aside. Let dead dreams lie. But Docker had used the word twice. What did Docker mean? Larkin shrugged off this line of thinking.

There was almost no question in his mind as to what he was going to do. If he took Docker's offer, and tried to trim the Martians, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt what old Malovar would do. The temper of the Martian ruler—chieftain, high priest—he had all these titles and more—was certain. Malovar brooked no cheating of his people.

But, of course, Malovar did not know

about this offer of Docker's. Larkin was glad of that. He did not want Malovar even to guess what was in the minds of the men in the ship.

Entering his store, Larkin started in surprise. Seated in a soft chair at the back was Malovar.

THE Martian ruler was old, how old only Malovar and the gods of Mars knew. His skin was wrinkled, his face was a bleak mask that looked as if it had never formed a smile. Except for the curious metal staff that he held across his lap, the Martian ruler wore no insignia of his office. His clothing was a simple tunic like the togas of the ancient Romans. He was smoking a thin reed pipe, the only luxury he ever permitted himself, and the rich flavor of Martian tobacco was heavy in the room. With him was one attendant, an elder of the tribe.

Larkin bowed. "I am honored, sire." It was not too unusual for Malovar to pay him a visit. The ruler went from the greatest mansion to the humblest hut at will.

"Come sit, my friend." The Martian's voice was as gentle as the passing of a soft breeze but Larkin knew that this breeze would turn into a tornado in an instant. He sat down. Silently, Malovar extended his tobacco pouch. Silently Larkin took it.

"A ship landed this afternoon, my friend," Malovar said.

"Yes," Larkin agreed.

"You have been to talk to your countrymen."

It was a simple statement. Larkin writhed inwardly but attempted no denial. "How did you know?"

"I have ways of knowing. Tell me, are they scientists, or explorers, or traders? Or some other breed of that curious creature—the human being?"

"They—" Larkin hesitated. How much did he dare reveal? This Martian had most penetrating and discerning eyes. "They hope to trade."

"Ah," Malovar was quiet for a long time. "My friend, you have been here and I have known you for seven years. During this time I have been pleased to call you friend."

"I have been honored," Larkin spoke. "They have been most enjoyable years." Why was this feeling of sweat suddenly

appearing on his body? The room was cool almost to the point of being chilly now that the night had come.

"You have helped many of us. Seekin was in here this afternoon—"

"It was nothing," Larkin said, embarrassed.

"Many times you have done this deed which you call *nothing*," Malovar continued. "I just wanted you to know that I was aware of some of these instances."

"It is good of you to mention them," Larkin said. He did not like this sparring, this talk that seemed to go nowhere.

"I wanted you to know that at the next time of the testing these deeds which you call *nothing* will be taken into consideration," Malovar said.

Sweat broke out all over Boyd Larkin.

"They will be given due weight, but they will *not* sway the scales in your favor against other possible deeds."

Only a strong effort of will kept Larkin from shaking. "Sire—"

Malovar rose. He lingered in the doorway. "I have come to regard you as a friend, the only human I have ever known whom I was willing to call by that name. I should regret very much losing my human friend."

"Sire—"

"But my regret will not stay my hand at the time of the testing!"

His lone elder following him, Malovar was gone into the Martian night.

III

MALOVAR left behind him an exceedingly perturbed human. Larkin knew the ruler well enough to know that Malovar meant what he said. His hand would not be stayed at the time of the testing. And that time might be any time when the temple bells sounded a summons to the vast, almost-ruined amphitheater which was used for the tests. Again a chill passed through Larkin. He had been through the testing before, many times, but there had never been any doubt in his mind that he would win through it. Now there was doubt.

He had seen what happened to those who failed. In him the chill grew to a shudder. These Martians had the damndest customs. Faced with this choice, there could be

only one answer.

Docker and his cut-throat crew could really go to hell. Better defy Docker than Malovar. There was no way in which the humans could enforce their demands on him.

Or was there? So far as he knew there were no weapons in this city strong enough to resist the power of the single ship that lay outside. The Martians obeyed Malovar because of custom, and not because the ruler had any way to enforce his orders. Larkin could see no way by which Malovar could force Docker to go through the testing. A single trader could be forced. But a ship full of men armed with *Kell* guns—No!

Larkin spent most of the night going over what he would say to Docker's men when they arrived in the morning.

They came early. Three were the same. Standing in the door of his store, Larkin stared at the fourth man with growing horror in his heart. The sight of that fourth man hit him harder than Malovar's grim warning about the time of the testing.

The fourth man moved ahead of the others, came toward him. In this minute it seemed to Boyd Larkin that he had aged years. Something that he had left back on Earth, left there because he could neither control it nor face it, had come unbidden to him here on Mars. In this moment, he wildly regretted that he had not fled to some outlying village during the hours of darkness.

It was too late to flee now. He had to face the consequences.

He forced himself to move forward, to hold out his hand. Inside of him, operating on an unconscious level, a kind of wild gladness came up. He forced it back down. This was no time for errant emotions.

"Roy!"

This man was his son.

Roy Larkin took his father's hand indifferently. "Hi," he said, and dropped the hand.

With horribly mixed memories flooding through him, Boyd Larkin stared at this man who was his son. He remembered this man in his play-pen, a curly headed tot fiercely demanding his toys. He remembered him in high school, the kid who was going to be the best athlete in school, or else. The hard driving, I-don't-give-a-damn-what-happens-to-you, I'll-get-mine attitude had been

obvious in him even then.

It was an attitude which the best specialists in the functioning of the emotions had been unable to control. Roy Larkin seemed to have been born with the grim intention of grabbing everything that was handy, and to hell with everybody else. When his father, knowing the inevitable outcome of such an attitude, had been driven finally to interfere, the explosion had been catastrophic.

Larkin's ears still burned with the memory of what he had been called. "A stupid fool. An incompetent jackass. An idiot without enough sense to come in out of the rain!" There had been other words too. At the end of the argument, the youth had slugged his father. This had happened when he was twenty.

Boyd Larkin had come to Mars then, a grim, bitter, disappointment and frustrated man fleeing from all memories. He had hoped never to hear of his son again.

But his son had come to him here on Mars.

"I'm taking over," Roy Larkin said. "The fact that you're my old man won't get you anything."

"You're taking over? I thought Docker—"

"Docker works for me."

"What?"

"You heard me." The voice was blunt. It stated a fact. "I listened while he talked to you last night. I wanted to get an estimate of the situation. Of course, we'll take care of you. We'll leave you in charge of the station here."

"But—"

"There are no 'buts' about it. I have made a study of the need for agricultural minerals on Mars. If handled properly, the thing is richer than forty mints. I intend to see that it is handled properly. You could have made a fortune here, if you'd had good sense." An accusatory note crept into the voice as if the failure to make a fortune when one was to be had was an act that Roy Larkin could neither understand nor forgive.

BOYD Larkin felt a burning inside of him, replacing the gladness he had felt when first he saw this man. There had been no change. There was no possibility of change. "You seem to know quite a lot

about Mars."

"I do," Roy Larkin grinned. "I've made a study of the subject. A couple of articles you wrote gave me the idea that the right man could clean up here. Of course, I didn't think that *you* were the man—"

"There may be difficulties," the father said.

"We expect them. So what?" Roy Larkin gestured at the men with him, a gesture which also included the *Kell* guns they carried and which included the *Kell* gun held in the elbow of his left arm. "If these don't do the job, we've got bigger things on the ship."

"I see," Boyd Larkin said. He was regaining some of his lost composure but he was acquiring no liking for the situation.

"We're not looking for trouble but we came prepared for it. I thought you would be big enough fool to tell us to go to hell if you had the chance. Well, you've got the chance but you either throw in with us or we throw you out—bodily." His manner said he was prepared to back up his words.

Larkin was silent. They could remove him bodily from this place. He could not resist four men. "But what if the Martians refuse to trade with you when you take over?" he said quietly.

"How can they refuse? They've got to have minerals. Without them, they starve."

"They might choose to starve," Boyd Larkin said.

"What?" the younger man gasped. "But that's silly. That's crazy. You don't know what the hell you're talking about. You're trying to pull a fast one."

"They're a strange people," Boyd Larkin said, ignoring his son's outburst. "Sometimes they seem to do crazy things though I have usually found that back of their craziness is a vein of such hard common sense that it is bewildering to us humans."

Roy Larkin was a little uncertain. "They've been dealing with you. They'll deal with us."

"That does not necessarily follow. What you do not understand is that they have a certain test, and that I have passed it."

"A test? Well, what is it. If you can pass it so can we. You haven't got anything that we haven't got."

An involuntary shudder passed over Larkin. "Perhaps. But this test isn't exactly

easy." A sound came to his ears. Over the city of Sudal was flooding the sound of temple bells. The shudder came over him again, grew stronger.

His son's eyes were sharp on him. "What the hell are you shaking about?"

"The temple bells—"

"So what?"

"That's the call to the testing. It's an emergency call. It means us."

He saw unease appear momentarily on the face of his son and the men with him, then he saw it shrugged away. "If we have to pass some kind of a test to do business with these fools, all right. We'll pass it."

"I hope," Boyd Larkin whispered. Already the elders had put in their appearance and were coming toward them. They carried with them the long metal rods like the one Malovar carried and which were the sign of their office.

"They come to take us to the place of the testing," Larkin said. He straightened his shoulders. The Martian elders bowed politely and motioned him to precede them.

Neither his son nor the men with him liked the idea. They did not know what was going to happen. They would have preferred to go elsewhere. But Larkin was going and they could hardly let him out-face them. Besides, they had *Kell* guns. So what danger could they meet that they could not overcome?

IV

THE place of the testing was a huge coliseum that had been centuries old when the human race was still in the barbaric stage of its development. It had been designed to hold tens of thousands of spectators and once unquestionably it had held them but the whole population of Sudal and the surrounding territory would now hardly fill the lower tiers. Looking out at the encroaching desert, where pathetic little patches of greenery tried to stem the tide of encroaching desolation, it was easy to see why this stadium could no longer be filled.

Already the Martians were beginning to trickle into the lower seats when the humans arrived at the top of the vast bowl.

"What the hell goes on here?" Roy Larkin kept demanding. "I don't like this."

"You've got your *Kell* guns, what are you

afraid of?" the trader asked.

"I'm not afraid," the younger man angrily answered. "Except for the metal rods the old gooks are carrying, they're not armed. Hell, we're not afraid of them. It's just that I don't know what the hell is supposed to take place."

"You'll find out," Boyd Larkin answered.

In the center of the vast amphitheater was a raised stone altar. In this dry atmosphere, the red stains on it never weathered away. Directly behind the altar was a chair. Malovar was already taking his place in this chair. Leading up to the altar, a double line of elders was forming. Other elders had already made a large circle of living statues around their ruler.

With only the slightest perceptible hesitancy in his stride, Larkin went down the steps of this coliseum. Very vaguely he wondered how many Martians had traveled this path in the centuries gone. There must have been uncounted millions of them. He, personally, had seen most of the inhabitants of Sudal pass this way at one time or another. He had passed this way himself upon his arrival here. He had not fully understood what could happen then, he had been hurt to the bottom of his soul, and he had not cared much what did happen. He had passed the test, then and later. But now—

Malovar's warning of the night before was still ringing in his ears. "My regret will not stay my hand at the time of the testing."

"Where the hell are we supposed to go?" Roy Larkin questioned, as they reached the bottom of the steps. "This looks like a Roman circus, or something."

"Follow me," the trader answered. His step was firm as he trod between the lines of the elders. He knew them, all of them, he had sold minerals to most of them. Now their faces were as immobile as stone. They seemed never to have seen him. At this moment, he was a stranger among them, an alien they did not seem to know.

He walked up in front of the altar, stood facing Malovar.

Sitting in the big throne chair behind the altar, the face of the Martian ruler was a mask far more bleak than the faces of his elders. Now in this moment he wore the regalia of his office, the carved jeweled

crown, the diadem of gems suspended from his throat. Either the crown or the diadem would have been worth a fortune back on Earth. Behind him, Larkin heard the humans catch their breath at the sight of these jewels. He knew what they were thinking: a few quick bursts from the *Kell* guns and this fortune would be theirs.

"Are you prepared for the test?" Malovar's eyes centered on Larkin.

"I am prepared, Sire. But why am I being tested now?"

"Any individual may be tested at any time the welfare of the people in my opinion requires such testing." The Martian words seemed almost to be part of a ritual.

"And on what will your decision be reached?"

"Again, the welfare of my people," Malovar answered.

"I mean—what deeds of mine will be judged here?"

Malovar's face grew bleaker still. "Perhaps nothing you have done but something you may do."

"But you cannot test me now for something I have not yet done, you cannot read the future!" the human protested.

"Perhaps by testing you now I may guide the future," Malovar answered. "But—enough of talk. Kneel!"

Larkin knew he had no further choice. He went down on his knees before the altar. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw one of the elders take Malovar's staff from him, hand him instead the sword. Larkin knew that the blade of that sword was razor sharp. Driven with only moderate force it would cut flesh and bone instantly.

He closed his eyes.

He felt himself grabbed by the shoulder and jerked backward. He faced the raging, frightened eyes of his son. "What the hell's going on here?"

"This is the test," he explained. "You have to go through this test before you can sell minerals to the people of Sudal."

"But what's he going to do?" The younger man gestured toward Malovar who stood erect.

"I do not know. His action is his choice."

"But he is acting and you are acting as if he may chop off your head!"

"That is exactly what he may do, if he so chooses."

"But that's crazy!" Roy Larkin exploded.

"To us, yes. To the Martians, no. This is the way they have of testing the loyalty of individuals to the group. At the time of the annual testing all the inhabitants of this city pass one by one before Malovar."

"And he cuts off the heads of the ones he don't like!" Horror sounded in Roy Larkin's voice.

"I do not think his liking or not liking has anything to do with it," the trader explained. "He is working for the good of his whole people, not his personal good. And he cuts off heads if he chooses. I have seen him lop off a dozen heads in a single hour."

Sweat oozed out of Larkin as the memory came back to him.

"But, damn it, we don't have to go through with this test. We're not Martians—"

"We propose to do business with them. This is the way they test our fitness to do business with them. They make the rules here."

A SNARL was in his son's voice. "But we don't have to obey them!"

"What is this discussion?" Malovar spoke softly, in Martian.

"I am explaining to my son what is happening here," Larkin said.

"Your son?" Something very close to surprise showed on the wrinkled, bleak face. "Is *this* man *your* son?"

"He is," Larkin answered. There was no apology and no attempt at explanation in his voice. He stated a fact, and if it damned him, then it damned him. The interpretation of that fact he left up to the Martian ruler.

Malovar seemed not to find that interpretation difficult. For an instant, the eyes of the Martian went to the younger Larkin, weighing and testing him. Malovar's face grew bleak indeed as if his eyes saw the surface and what was under the surface and found none of it to his liking. Then his eyes came back to the trader.

"We will continue with the testing," he said.

"I am ready," Larkin answered, moving toward the altar.

"Hey, wait a minute," his son said, seizing his arm.

Larkin shrugged off the grip. "You idiot!" Anger blazed in his voice. "Don't you know what you face here? This test must be accepted, or you will never do business on Mars."

"All right, you old fool!" His son's voice was shrill with anger too, though not the same kind of anger. "Go on and get your stupid head chopped off and see if I care."

"I did not expect you to care," Larkin answered. He laid his head on the altar.

Malovar lifted the long sword.

Over the coliseum the assembled Martians seemed to catch their collective breath and then to stop breathing. The silence became thick, heavy, like a pall of gray mist. In that voiceless instant it seemed to Boyd Larkin that time itself was standing still. What would Malovar do? Larkin did not know, and had never known, the facts on which the ruler based his decision to strike or not to strike.

What did knowing, or not knowing, matter now, in the moment that might see the end of his life?

The hushed silence was broken by a single sharp cry. Larkin opened his eyes. He saw Malovar catch the movement of the sword. He turned his head in the direction from which the cry had come.

Down between the lines of the elders a single Martian was running.

Seekin!

Seekin came to a halt before the altar, bowed before Malovar. His gaze did not go to the human rising to his feet. He looked at Malovar.

"I claim the privilege of taking his place, Sire," Seekin said. "According to the ancient law of the testing, I take his place."

Larkin blinked startled eyes. A glow came up in him. He was hardly aware of it. He had never seen this thing happen before, he did not know it could happen, he did not know that Martian minds worked this way. Surprise was in him.

Surprise seemed to be in Malovar too. Over the coliseum the silence seemed to become heavier as if thousands of Martians were each holding his breath in wonder and in awe.

After the first flash of surprise, Malovar's face became bleak again.

"Do you accept the human's fate as your fate, whatever my decision may be?" the Martian ruler questioned.

Under his brown, Seekin showed a creeping tide of white. He knew what was meant, knew it intimately and well. But his nod was resolute and undaunted.

"Yesterday he gave me valuable minerals in exchange for a valueless jewel. Thus he gave life to me and to my family. And he gave me more than was needed, so that something more might be grown—for someone else. Thus he has fulfilled the highest tenet of our law." Sire—"Seekin bowed low. "—whatever it may be, I accept his fate."

The words were simply spoken. The soft slurred sounds hardly disturbed the quiet air. But they carried a wealth of meaning.

Over the vast throng a sigh arose as if the watching Martians were seeing a miracle. For the first time since he had been on Mars, Boyd Larkin saw a real smile appear on the bleak and bitter face of Malovar. The smile was almost a benediction.

The benediction of that moment was shattered by a furious blast of sound.

Brrrrp, brrrrp, brrrrp!

The sound of *Kell* guns in operation.

V

THE elder standing beside Malovar clutched his throat and collapsed, blood spurting from a hole in his throat. Larkin jerked startled eyes toward the source of the sound.

On top of the coliseum was a group of men from the ship. Docker led them. They were firing *Kell* guns indiscriminately into the Martian crowd.

The *brrrrp-brrrrp* was an almost continuous blast of sound. Following the throb of the guns was the violence of the explosions of the striking missiles. The whole vast arena throbbed to the fury of the sound.

"No!" Larkin screamed.

This was a slaughter of helpless innocents. The Martians were unprotected, incapable of defending themselves. And they had done nothing wrong.

"Stop!" The voice of Malovar was like thunder rolling through the arena. He spoke in Martian but there was no mistaking his meaning. He dropped the sword, took back

his metal rod that was part of the regalia of his office, held it erect. In that moment he was like a tribal god ordering the lightning and the thunder.

The answer, coming from above, was a slug that whistled within inches of Malovar's head and exploded behind him.

"For the last time, stop!"

Another slug howled downward.

Then Malovar acted.

Larkin was not quite certain what happened but out from the tip of the metal staff that Malovar held seemed to flash a bolt of blinding radiance. It was not a thunderbolt, it was not electrical, it was probably no force known to Earth scientists.

Looking upward, Larkin expected to see the flashing radiance blast through the group of humans like a smashing thunderbolt, searing and destroying them, leaving in its wake chunks of charred and writhing flesh that had once been men.

No such thing happened. The blinding radiance swirled around the men. It formed a coating around each of them. In a split second each of them was encased in a plastic cocoon that looked like ice, a covering that held them helpless. They still retained their guns but the plastic force covered the guns too. The guns were silent. Either they could not fire into the plastic coat or the men who still grasped them could not move their fingers to press the triggers.

Like statues frozen in motion, the group stood at the top of the coliseum, on the highest row of seats of that vast circling arena.

A cry of rage sounded near Larkin, then was suddenly stilled.

At the sound of the cry near him, Larkin turned, saw that his son and the men with him were likewise encased in plastic envelopes. He saw that his son's eyes were bulging from terror, his throat pulsating from the effort of trying to scream. But no sound was coming forth.

Radiance pouring from the tip of the staff of one of the elders had accomplished this effect.

The torture of that moment must have been a terrible thing for Roy Larkin. To be held helpless by a force that stilled all motion, to want to scream but be unable to hear the blessed sound of your own voice,

to see the consequences of your own acts coming home upon your head—this was torture.

Malovar and his elders had not been helpless. They had retained in the metal rods some of the vast forgotten science of old Mars, a science that they rarely used, and rarely needed to use.

Malovar, his face still like thunder, was standing erect and was directing what was to happen next.

THERE were screams in the coliseum, of wounded and dying Martians, and a vast stir as Martian friends ran to help those who had been injured, and a babble of voices rising in anger. The elders were moving. Some of them were attending to the stricken. Others were directing the removal of Docker and the men with him from the top of the coliseum. Docker and his men were being carried down by Martians. They seemed incapable of movement of their own.

The whole group was brought before Malovar.

The face of the Martian was the face of a tribal god, furious with anger. He made a motion with his hand toward Docker. The Martians carrying the man laid him face down on the altar. Malovar handed his metal staff to the nearest elder, took up the sword.

There was no mistaking the intention of the Martian. He lifted the sword, brought it down. Just before it reached its target, the plastic envelope collapsed as the elder holding the staff made a slight shift with it.

Docker had time to start a scream. The scream ended. A head skittered across the stone, blood spurted.

A moan went over the watching throng.

Larkin watched, appalled. He had seen Martian heads roll here before but somehow this scene was different. Here was Martian justice, swift, sure, and final.

Malovar made another motion with his hand. The nearest human, one of the men with Docker, was lifted, carried to the altar. Larkin saw the man's muscles writhe against the plastic force envelope that held him, writhe unavailingly.

Sunlight glinted on the red blade of the sword as it came down.

Again a moan went up from the audience.

Malovar pointed with his sword—at Roy Larkin. Elders seized the man, lifted him, carried him to the altar.

The sword came up.

"NO!" A single burst of involuntary sound came from the lips of the trader. He leaped forward. "NO!"

Malovar held the sword, looked at him. The Martian looked a little sad.

"I know he is your son, my friend, but he came here to cheat and to rob. Men under his direction have killed."

"But—"

"The laws of my people are explicit," Malovar continued. "Nor will I stay my hand for the sake of friendship at the time of the testing."

"But—" Larkin still protested. Here was a bond, an obligation, that went beyond friendship.

"I am sorry," Malovar said gently. His tone of voice and the expression on his face said he was really sorry. But they also said he had no intention of holding his hand from striking.

Boyd Larkin moved again. He was not quite sure why he did what he did and he was utterly unsure as to what the result would be, but in the face of the rising sword, he lifted his son from the altar.

"I claim your law," he said. "I take his place." He laid himself on the altar.

Over the watching throng there was silence. He sensed rather than saw Malovar lift the sword.

There was a stir of feet near him. A gentle voice spoke.

"I also claim the law. I have bought his life once this day. You may not strike him."

Seekin's voice. Soft and gentle but very firm and very sure. Seekin stood before the altar with uplifted hand. He spoke to Malovar but his eyes were on Larkin.

"You are free, my friend. Our laws protect you now and will protect you until the next time of the testing."

Malovar lowered the sword blade. "Our laws hold," he said. "I may not accept you as a substitute sacrifice. Nor may I accept Seekin. Nor may I accept him—" his eyes sought Roy Larkin. His voice became terrible as he spoke a single word. "—now."

He made a gesture with his hand toward the elder who had taken his metal staff.

The elder touched the staff in a certain place. Around Roy Larkin the plastic envelope vanished.

Roy Larkin came to his feet, his fingers clutching the *Kell* gun, the wild light of terror in his eyes. Looking at him, Boyd Larkin caught his breath. There was such terror and wild fear in this man as he had never seen before, such terror as might send death spurting from the muzzle of the *Kell* gun in a steady stream.

Larkin saw his son's finger tighten on the trigger, an involuntary movement. Malovar must have seen the movement too, all the Martian elders must have seen it. They must have known the meaning of it, must have understood that they were facing death. Not a Martian moved a muscle.

Roy Larkin apparently had expected them to cringe, to fawn, to beg. When they did nothing, he seemed confused. Wonderingly he stared at them. His gaze came to the face of his father. On his features the confusion grew. His eyes came down to the *Kell* gun. Something was happening inside of him, what it was no man except he knew or could know. As he seemed to realize he still held the gun, a look of horror appeared on his face. He dropped the weapon. It clattered on the stone floor, the only sound in that vast silence.

Then there was another sound, a sound that resembled the cry of a child gulping a single word—"Daddy." Roy Larkin was saying that single word and he was moving toward his father.

"I've been so terribly wrong," Roy Larkin whispered. "For so many years I've been wrong. I wanted to tell you, but I never could, until now."

Boyd Larkin folded his son into his arms. The hard, bitter driving man that he had known this morning was somehow gone. The man who was in his arms and clutching his shoulders and burying his head against his chest was somehow a little boy who had been lost, bewildered, and alone, and who was no longer lost, who in this moment was growing to the stature of manhood.

Larkin patted the shoulders of this man-boy. His eyes were moist and there was a choke in his throat. Here was something that he had wanted desperately for so many years. Now he had it. His son, his son!

In him somewhere was a feeling not of triumph but of vast achievement. He looked over his son's shoulders at Malovar. The Martian's face was glowing as if he too was tasting this feeling of vast achievement. In this moment Malovar no longer looked like a tribal god demanding vengeance. Malovar looked like a very gentle and kindly old Martian.

"Mine eyes have seen wonders this day," Malovar spoke. "I think at the next time of the testing all of you will be safe from me."

"Do you mean that?" Larkin whispered.

"Of course. I never make careless statements." He made a gesture toward the elder who held his metal staff.

Around him Larkin was aware that the other humans were being freed from the force envelopes that held them powerless. There were clattering sounds, the noises of weapons being dropped from hands that no longer chose to use them.

Over the watching throng a sigh was rising, such a sigh as may come from the lips of those who have seen wonders past the understanding.

AT THE top of the coliseum, where the vast red deserts stretched away under a thin harness of tiny canals, they paused.

Roy Larkin had changed. The fear and the terror were gone. A different enthusiasm was in his voice. "We can still bring minerals here but we will no longer operate as I had planned. We will operate on a cost-plus basis, we will deliver them here at a price . . ."

"The buyer can afford," Boyd Larkin said softly.

"Right," his son said.

Behind them stood Malovar and Seekin. Malovar grunted approvingly. "Through such men as you, minerals can come to Mars—and with them new life may come to an old and dying world."

Malovar looked beyond the city to the red deserts. He seemed to be seeing them as vast stretches of greenery, as interlacing canals with lush vegetation covering all the land that now was desert but someday would be something else. His face glowed.

"You also seem to have won a victory here," Boyd Larkin spoke.

"Yes," Malovar answered. "I have

blended the laws of my people with the drive of you humans, made each aware of the other, made each respect and support the other. The victory will be *there*, in the years that are to come."

He gestured toward the deserts where in his imagination an old world was again coming to life. The glow deepened on his face. He was seeing a lost dream come true.

Boyd Larkin had the fleeting impression that this old Martian ruler had somehow manipulated and conspired the actions that had taken place in the arena down below, that he had moved both his own people—and the humans—like puppets on strings.

For an instant the thought startled the trader. Then he looked again at Malovar's face, saw the glow there, and knew that even if Malovar had manipulated them like puppets on strings the purpose of Malovar's manipulations was clear. It was new life on an old planet, new life for two peoples, the Martians and the humans.

With that purpose, Boyd Larkin had complete sympathy.

Quietly the four of them moved down from the top of the coliseum, toward the peaked roofs of the city of Sudal.

Beyond them, the red deserts already seemed to be greening with new vegetation, new life.

VIZIGRAPH (Continued from page 91)

that inkwell, Malcolm!) This invisible BEM told me that he was there when Bixby read my stories, and that Bixl's face went dead white, and he started to gasp. By the time he got to the last line, he was barely sane. But that a shot of Martian Brandy brought him back to sanity, and some of the blood back to his face. When he read my poem, he started gibbering in an unintelligible language. His hands shook, he swayed in his chair—that self-same chair you are sitting in Mal!—and slumped across his typewriter in a dead *coma*.

My stories, it is true, had a marked effect on Bixl's sanity, but they were not responsible for the ghastly effects I shall now describe.

About the beginning of this year, my BEM confident says, Bixl got the faraway look in his eyes. He was seen drawing sketches of unearthly things. Things so unearthly that even my BEM shuddered at their sight. Bixl became fidgety, restless, until one day he ran screaming from his office, and no one has seen him since. Yes, Bixl went the way of Whitehorn and Payne!

Do you realize, man, what a post of danger you are in? What gruesome fate awaits you? Perhaps you will be eaten for dinner by the house authors. Or, worse yet, you may be shackled onto your swivel chair, and watch Anderson paint one of his covers. How grizzly! Even now Anderson himself may be sneaking up on you with a chain and padlock. *Look Out! Gad!*

I have even thought of a worse fate . . . Scott may tell me to send you my latest story. You will be locked in your office and made to read it. You will scream and pound on the door, but to no avail. The utter horror of it!

I am the scourge of fandom. Every time I get a letter published, it is always immediately after that particular mag has changed editors . . . You can piece together the terrifying details yourself.

I must be signing off now. I have to go cast some spells for one of my customers.

Fiendishly

BILL TUNING

Bill Tuning, The Sneaky Solomon of Santa Barbara

Ed's note: Ghouls to you, Mr. Tuning. I want you to know that the first editor of PLANET has recently returned from his grave to help on this life-giving magazine. He says it's a lot more fun than being dead all the time.

SPACE CADET MALKERSON SUGGESTS A GY7

2301 Damuth Street,
Oakland 2, California

Transmitting to PLANET Magazine:

I'm a cadet at the Academy. Freshman. Should be getting my ensign's papers in about four years. Of course you know that.

Right now we're (my roommate and I) on the P. R. S. Lunar Night. It's a sweet little ship but, OUCH!!! does the Old Man keep a tight ship. We made a routine flight from Terra to the Space Station to Luna. In the Station for an hour. Pass? Heck, no! We checked hull plates. Jupiter! That guy must think they're platinum. We checked 'em before we left Terra. And that's not all. He kept a heel and toe radar watch. You couldn't even take time out for a cup of java.

I've a message for that old spaceman, Joe Gibson. Sounds like he's getting pretty old—for a spaceman—around thirty-five. He says that his cargo of bfrsk wrecks his signal. Scuttle-butt from the Comm. H. Q. Earthside has it, that instead of using your converter leads for a booster, try a GY7 circuit hooked through your photo-synthesis lights in the hydroponics compartment. It won't cut down your air supply any, but it will furnish a sharp, clear sending signal. Seems that the guys who handle the technical stuff have been trying for some time now to track down the juice that's thrown off by the atomic reactors. They found most of the current collects in photo-synthesis light dynamo.

I'd like to ask a question. Why are all poorly written stories referred to as "teenage" or "adolescent?" Some readers seem to think we enjoy these stories. I like Heinlein. Is he a poor author? Is Bradbury? Williamson? Asimov? I think they're tops. Just so you won't think I have no reason for saying these things: I'm fourteen.

Well, there goes the fifteen-minute flare. I guess they'll be—Yes, the to-your-stations siren just sounded. I'd better get out of this radio room before the watch officer catches me. That wouldn't be very good, not on this ship. Like I said, the Old Man is a stickler.

MERRILL MALKERSON, Cadet
Space Academy,
Terra.

METHUSELAH FORGIVE US!

40-14 10 Street,
Long Island City 1, N. Y.

Dear Ironsides:

You still must think that you are editing Westerns. Is that an Indian on the Jan. ish? Looks Mohican to me, but it couldn't be, I thought that the last of the Mohicans was killed long time ago. What story does the cover illustrate? Well it looks like Anderson is back to his old form again; drawing covers that don't illustrate a story.

I also notice that you are not monopolizing on Vestal. You got a couple of other interior artists, that I think, are better than him. I'm not saying that he's bad, but geeze, it would be nice if he could make his girls look different.

What is Poul doing? Writing a history about the Universe. They always seem to be the same too, fighting with swords. I also find a race like the Arzunians who were more advanced than humans, and who loved to fight amongst each other or other races not using atom guns or something like that. Anderson explained himself about the latter but still, I find it illogical. Maybe I'm wrong and I should of kept my mouth shut.

The story was good though, and I enjoyed reading it.

I see that there's a little feud starting in La Viza about Bradbury. I've read the latter's stories, liked them. Maybe he does write a little on the morbid side but that doesn't mean he's a psycho. I never met Bradbury so I can't say a thing about him. I'm inclined to believe W. F. Nolan rather than Miss Corby for he knows Ray personally.

Now about your letter column:

As usual it was interesting and good reading. I also notice that us youngsters were blasted by a few letters. Well that's the way it goes I guess, it always seems that we juveniles are always getting scorned at by the older generation. It also seems that the older generation forget when they were the younger generation. Quite boring isn't it. Now let us children who have "stardust in their eyes" bow down and beg forgiveness for our bad behavior while traversing the Universe.

Get ready, get set, go:

"Methuselah forgive us"

"Methuselah forgive us"

"Methuselah forgive us"

Are we forgiven?

Yes!

Now let us all take the solemn oath that never again shall we fly in our gyro drive rocket-ships.

WE PROMISE!

Yours Truly,

JOSEPH SEMENOVICH

(And may I never ride in a starship again.)

AUSTRALIA CALLING

Box 61, The Union
University of Sydney, NSW
Australia

Dear Sir:

Although we are still pretty well cut off from most science-fiction published, there are plenty of keen fans down here in Australia. In Sydney, where we're mainly concentrated, we have a group carrying on pretty much the same kind of fan activities possible in any large city in the States. There is some amateur publishing, a community library is maintained, new STF is circulated around. We have a weekly free-for-all session of thumbing magazines and talk, polite conversation or table-pounding debate, in a centrally-located restaurant.

Visualize a collection of interests and opinions as diverse as found in the average PLANET'S VIZIGRAPH, let loose together, that's us. Fans who swoon with ecstatic something or other at the mention of Ray Bradbury and others who regard him with aversion or mystification can carry on the kind of dispute you've been running lately much more efficiently in the flesh, even though it doesn't give them a couple of months to think up well-polished replies to their opposite number's last broadside. I comment: PLANET is OK. Not the best magazine published, but consistent. The bulk of the stories are the mixture as before to anyone who's been reading STF for a number of years, but they're still well done and entertaining. For the younger readers—well, newer ones at any rate—excellent. Certainly free of most of the really bad features of modern STF, except for those ugly covers, which are pretty well universal. No paranoia about flying saucers or caves, no slobbering sexual aberrations, no jingoism and race theory, no bum humor, no hardboiled gadget-opera with cardboard superman involved machinations but no real plot, and sleight-of-hand trick endings. PLANET is in fact about the nearest approach today to the STF of the few years before the war, when the field was newly formed as a distinct thing, and the later violent changes were yet to come.

Occasionally we welcome visitors from other parts of Australia. Bob Geappen from Hobart, Don Tuck from Melbourne, John Park from Perth—like fans from Charleston, St. Louis and San Francisco visiting New York. Our small population is spread thin over a lot of territory. Tom Cockcroft and Jack Murtagh from New Zealand—like Hawaiians calling in on San Francisco. And every few months the well-known STF writer A. Bertram Chandler turns up. He's Chief Officer on a British ship with a regular run out this way. We have in Sydney, too, a man whose name will be familiar to old-timers: Alan Connell, who wrote THE REIGN OF THE REPTILES, DREAM'S END and others many years ago.

We are going to hold a convention in Sydney next year, a week-end show at which we hope to bring together a large number of locals and at least a few visitors for a program of talks, exhibition of unusual items of STF interest, screening of films, and general sociable get-together.

March 22 is the date set—it can't be on the same scale as the U. S. Conventions, but we'll do our best. And in the meantime, we'd like to hear from any Australian readers. Why not drop me a line? Or in Melbourne, contact Don Tuck at 13 Gordon St., Footscray; in Perth, Roger Dard at 232 James St.

GRAHAM B. STONE

NEW CAMOUFLAGE

142 North Madison Ave.,
LaGrange, Illinois

Dear (what's yer salary?) Ed:

Pixies are: 1) Martin Lewkowicz; 2) Henry Burwell, Jr.; 3) Joseph Semenovitch.

I rank the stories as follows:

- 1) THE ILLUSIONARIES—Swonderful!
- 2) GRIM GREEN WORLD—Excellent
- 3) SWORDSMAN OF LOST TERRA—Very Good
- 4) THE LAST LAUGH—Good
- 5) PALIMPSEST—Fairly Good
- 6) WRECK OFF TRITON—Fair
- 7) HALFTripper—Not-so-good
- 8) THE PIT OF NYMPHONS—Worse
- 9) THE CONQUISTADORS COME—Foo & Ptoo

Don't know perzactly what Burwell was talking about, but I like what he said. I get his point about selection of letters, being that the actual minority gets as much Vizispace as the majority. But, as you say, air as many views as possebell (some of them need that airing).

I am of Lewkowicz's school of photi (phonetic spelling of fish) as regards to covers. Suggestions (sing. of suggestion) for concealing same: buy two mags, PLANET and some inferior pulp, at one time and carry cover-to-cover with rupture-easer ad out.

About the cover; it seems fairly accurate, except I wouldn't think that that monster in the background resembles a plant at all. Who's the artist? My copy was too badly mauled to be sure, but the signature looks like Anderson's.

Most of the inside illos seem all right, but there are (I think) other artists besides Vestal. Who's responsible for the Conquistadors looking the way they do? They jes' don' look right to me.

To Schemmerling I say I too have read some of the "better" literature. Some I like, some I don't, and on the whole I prefer science-fiction. I don't know why certain types of literature are "better" than others, but it should be a matter of personal preference.

Oddo's right; give mit a space-war novel.

Quadri-dimensionally yours,

STEPHEN TOWER

Ed's note: That sounds like an excellent way to pack our magazines. The only thing is, artist Anderson has just landed contract to illustrate rupture-easer ads.

FEMALES RETAIN BODY HEAT BEST

715 W. 175 Street, N. Y., N. Y.
Dear Titanium-Cranium (or is it pig-iron with silver paint?)

Here is a letter from one pimply-faced adolescent, as Mr. Strong would have it, giving his opinion of your magazine and of Mr. Strong. First, I think your mag is good, else I wouldn't keep buying it. Second, Strong in my opinion is a Bemlet with either an inferiority complex that you could step on or a bloated ego. I was as surprised at his letter as I would be if Emily Post wrote a letter stating that she liked sexy covers.

Here are my reactions to your stories as recorded on my super sensitive robot-tele-psychometer (a cousin to you maybe? He sends his regards).

(1) SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS—very good, but about the cover—Is that Valduma or the other br . . . I mean girl. And I don't remember any chap with a widow's peak like the one on the cover. (2) IT—rated a second with me. A trifle overdone though. There have been a lot of stories about parasites and the like. (3) CALLING WORLD 4 OF KITHGOL!—Pretty good. The rest I liked pretty much.

Send a pic to J. B. Vail, Jr. I liked his letter.

Oh, by the way—why must the girls always be clad in an inadequate piece of silk in the freezing cold and airlessness of space, while the male has to suffocate in a bulky space helmet with all the trimmings. Are you suggesting that females aren't quite human? IF SO! . . . I agree. Why don't you exhibit a little physique a la male. All you readers aren't men, you know.

Well, I have to be off to the smirzik (that's a fourth dimensional color) hills of Klippernosecoff (a fourth dimensional planet) to see a Klipper (short for Klippernosecoffian) about A Bem.

Psychiatrically Stefanatically yours,

ROBERT PAULIVE

Ed's note: Many people have wondered why PLANET girls are always skimpily clad while PLANET men are bundled up to their ears. This is the first time we have ever let the SF public in on the wherefores. PLANET'S large research department has long known what few others have realized—the female is secretly far more warm-blooded than the male.

Have you ever noticed how long a woman can swim in icy water? Did you happen to ask what your girl was wearing under that off-the-shoulder model at the New Year's eve dance? Well, the research department says that space aggravates this characteristic. The men get colder, the girls get warmer at the ratio of 4 to 1. Startling perhaps, but all dutifully footnoted in PLANET'S accurate files.

A LADY RETURNS

20 Stanley Street,
Irvington, N. J.

Dear Editor:

Although I started reading science-fiction magazines about fifteen years ago, there has been a gap of six years during which I didn't have time to read anything and so I sort of fell away, but I came back. The January 1952 issue of your magazine is the first I've seen, and I thought I'd tell you how much I enjoyed it.

I'm almost afraid to open my big fat mouth on any subject since I see what a slamming around Dennis-Strong and Mary Corby are getting for their personal ideas, but then I have always been a fool, and here I am with my opinions. Sometimes when I read the letters I feel like Morey Amsterdam when he says: "Wha? Whaddesay? What?" I'm glad to see Morton Paley and Bruce Hapke in THE VIZI-GRAPH. I've seen their letters in other mags and when I recognized their names I felt that I was sort of home.

I like the covers. I like to see the girls the way you have them, but I'd like to see some musclemen, too. I like the sight of a well-turned bicep, myself, that's only hyooman. I like Ray Bradbury too. What's all the smoke and fuss?

Of course, since I have been away from S-F so long, it stands to reason that I am in favor of re-prints, since that way I can catch up on what I missed. Everything seem so different now from when I left. I feel as if I was on another planet where S-F was unknown and have just come back to earth to find the field broadened, improved, more varied and exciting. The quality of writing is better, too. The characters in today's stories of tomorrow are as likeable and human as in today's stories of today. Whereas I used to read with the detached air of one being amused, I now live in these stories. It is I who am seeing the new sights on different planets and stars. It is I who draws those so plausible conclusions. Grammatically, I may be incorrect, but in my heart I know that I love S-F, and since meeting PLANET, I love it, too.

The best story was CALLING WORLD 4 OF KITHGOL though I didn't care for the title. Then THE ANDROID KILL. A FINE DAY FOR DYING and LAST CALL third. The VANDERLARK was passable and SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS didn't do anything to me although I did like the characterization of Basil Donovan. He seemed very human in his indecision, temptation, and final triumph over evil.

There is another S-F fan in this territory who cleans the shelves in my bookstore before I can get what I want. At first I contemplated secret murder, but now I'm on the lookout for him to see if we

can reach a trading compromise. Anyway murder is against the law.

Well, I'll be seeing you.

(Mrs.) HELEN HUBER

R. S. V. P.

47 Moonpark, Rd.,
Turves Green,
Northfield,
B'ham, 31,
England

Dear Editor:

As an enthusiastic reader of all the S-T-F and S-F-F magazines and books upon which I can set my big hands. I wrote to you at a time now in the not too distant past, bemoaning the dearth of said literature in this England of ours.

You were (or was it your predecessor?) good enough to print my screed in these excellent columns of PLANET, and the resultant flood from out of that great land was, to say the least, staggering.

Now, I wonder if you would be kind enough to let this letter sneak its way into print in your mag, as I am having great difficulty in tracing a certain Fan Samaritan in Los Angeles.

I know he is a reader of PLANET, and he sent me a fabulous treasure in U. S. magazines of STF and S-F-F, but I never did have his address, or any letter from him.

He used to sometimes enclose a little slip of paper in a mag, saying "good reading, R. H. G., H. A. B.," and the postmark was always Los Angeles.

Later, his slips said, R.S.V.P., R. H. G., and once, R.S.V.P., R. H. G., via PLANET.

Several friends over there have tried to trace him for me, but no luck, so I wish to try this.

If H. A. B. sees this, will he contact me, in order that I may thank him, (on sudden thought, is it her?) by personal letter.

Of course, the deal was a bit one sided, and I wonder if he/she would like subs placed for our English NEW WORLDS and SCIENCE FANTASY?

Regarding your excellent PLANET Stories which arrives at irregular intervals, via the good offices of other penpals, I am not going to criticize its contents, as I'm content with 'em!

But may I raise my voice among those others who deplore the covers? dare I?

I'd buy 'em if they had no covers at all, but I don't agree with displays of feminine curves in such hostile environments, especially when the hero is so lacking in chivalry as to retain his heavy space armour for his own protection.

I would like to thank all those Fen and Fempen who sent me mags and letters, and to those whom I promised mags I have not delivered, please write again and jolt my memory; I've had so many letters and mags, I've been swamped, and my correspondence is in a state of chaos.

Sincerely,

RON H. GREAVES

DR. VON BRAUN'S SPACE MEDICINE

Box 666
Camrose, Alberta

Dear Editor:

I've decided to become a member of LA VIZI'S aristocracy and offer serious comment on anything and everything. I've come to the late conclusion that intelligent ideas and viewpoints are worth more to an excellent magazine such as yours, than a long, drawn-out epistle of near-to-worthless wit. For one who has previously indulged in such a practice, I

think that my change is a drastic one. However, I think you'll agree with me that fans in general have a bad habit of filling the readers' section with comments and ideas that have little or no worth. I myself am such an offender, and I think it's time I changed my ways. So, if my fellow fans will bear with me, and not be offended by what I have just said, I'll start what I think to be an informative and enlightening discussion:

Now take the subject of SPACE FLIGHT—This topic has been hashed and re-hashed so many times that it's commonplace, but there's a never-ending scope of information and viewpoint that keeps the subject alive and interesting. Here is a preface to an article in a Canadian magazine which deals with the subject: "Here is a fascinating preview of the not-too-distant future when man may establish 'space platforms,' shoot across the continents in fabulous machines that travel at five miles a second, and perhaps journey to the moon. For science has progressed to the point where adventuring into space is no longer a pipe dream but a real possibility. But space rocketry brings with it major medical and engineering problems. To name but two: How can we hurl rockets away from the earth, against the tremendous pull of gravity, to circle the globe forever? Can humans, freed from the effects of gravity, survive as 'weightless' beings?"

"Dr. Wernher von Braun, a German V-2 expert now employed by the U. S. Army, says in the forthcoming book, SPACE MEDICINE, that it is 'the limits of the human frame that will make the final decision' as to whether manned space flight will become a reality. The answer, according to his co-workers, is not a 'yes'—yet.

But SPACE MEDICINE does give some of Dr. von Braun's answers to the basic question of space rocketry—how to get out there.

The problem: To design a rocket engine that will push the ship straight up through the thicker layers of the earth's atmosphere, level it off at 60 miles altitude, and then drive it outward into space another 1,000 miles, at a speed of about five miles a second. Dr. von Braun's calculations show that a slower-moving rocket would return to earth. And the rocket motor must keep running until the craft is beyond the atmosphere. There, because there is no friction, the ship can coast at the same velocity forever. There is no such rocket engine today. The best available, SPACE MEDICINE says, gives a top speed of only about a mile a second and there seems room only for about a 30 per cent improvement.

The answer: Hook three rockets together. As soon as the first stage "cuts out" when its fuel is exhausted, it could be jettisoned and the second stage would take over, to be replaced in the same manner by the third stage—the space ship itself. (The U. S. Air Force already has a two-stage rocket, a V-2 carrying a smaller "Wac Corporal."

One last paragraph before I leave this interesting subject:

"There are many barriers to man. On the planet Mercury, closest to the sun, a blazing, arid desert. On Venus, hidden behind swirling clouds of gas, still too much heat to sustain life. On Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto, no hope for active life in temperatures ranging from minus 130 to minus 200 degrees centigrade. That leaves only Mars, whose equatorial belt has temperatures similar to those on our Arctic tundra. But there will not be any man-like Martians. The best-developed Martian probably is a moss."

The last statement will probably dampen the enthusiasm of many avid STF fans. It dampened mine anyway.

Well, dear friends, I hope you got something out of my article. Now to more mundane matters: Liked the cover on January PLANET. Very startling to say the least. But why oh why must the characters always be wearing pained grimaces? How about some nice cheery smiles next ish?

In parting—one last note to S. Vernon McDaniel: You'd better confer with Miss Corby instead of me. I'm too busy. Besides, I don't like playing second fiddle. Too bad! I bet it would have developed into a beautiful friendship. (Besides—how did I get mixed up in the morbid subject of Bradbury's "death-motif" versus Miss Corby? I was just standing here minding my own business.)

For heaven's sake, Miss Corby, write to McDaniel and end the matter!

Sincerely,

MAVIS HARTMAN
Moon Maid No. 1

Ed's note: We liked your wit. We like your wisdom too.

STRONGLY VESTAL

4843 Maffitt,
St. Louis 13, Mo.

Dear Editor:

Having read your various publications for yars and yars, but have never gotten up enough courage to write you a letter, but have read quite a few of your fan letters on the pros and cons of your stories. But still am not just a science-fiction fan alone, rating your Fiction House Mags as such.

1. PLANET 2. SCIENCE-ADVENTURE
1. FRONTIER 2. TWO WESTERN STORIES
1. WINGS 2. TWO DETECTIVE STORIES
3. INDIAN etc.

But to get back to science-fiction I prefer my stories fiction with not too much science. So consequently my favorite authors are as follows:

1. Poul Anderson
2. Sprague De Camp.

I was an ardent reader of the late Robert E. Howard, and I wouldn't be surprised the two above authors were inspired by the Conan the Cimmerian series. Not that they plagiarized, but were using similar ideas, and that is why I approve of their work. I rate the last issue of PLANET (November 51) as follows:

1. SWORDSMAN OF LOST TERRA
Very Conanesque in detail of adventure period and setting. But it still retains originality of author.
2. PIT OF THE NYMPHONS
Good fiction story with just the right amount of science not to make it too boring.
3. WRECK OFF TRITON
4. GRIM GREEN WORLD
5. PALIMPSEST
(These three were saved by Vestal)
6. HALFTRIPPER
(Even Vestal couldn't save it).

Speaking of Vestal, he'd make a good cover artist also, but if it would necessitate removing him from the interior story headings, let it go. But the more Vestal pics I see in your mags the better I like them. That's why I said that Vestal saves some of your stories.

In your SCIENCE ADVENTURE No. 4 Winter

Issue. It is naturally understood that H. G. Wells the Prime Minister of Science Fiction had the best story in that issue, on which I agree. Of course Vestal's pic made it even more interesting. But of our modern science-fiction writers Sprague De Camp's Tritonian Ring holds his own with the later authors, and again Vestal made it perfect. So all in all by this time you have come to the conclusion I am slightly Vestal (and I don't mean Virgin) Conscious; so in ending I say keep Vestal your by-word for PLANET pics and I'll Go-Buy from Now On. Vestal-ly yours,

ROBERT J. GERSMAN

Ed's note: Might be a good idea to try Vestal on our covers.

COX RA11209432

Camp Crawford, Hokkaido
Japan

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you could do me a slight favor by publishing this little note? You see, I done up and joined the army last January and my fan activity sort of went to the dogs. I thought I'd let most of my friends and people in general know what had happened to me, but my folks at home tell me letters, advertisements and fanzines are still coming.

So I'd like this to tell one and all that read the VIZIGRAPH that I, Ed Cox, formerly of 4 Spring Street, Lubec, Maine, now am known as: Pvt. Edmund M. Cox RA11209432, 45th Sig. Co., 45th Inf. Div., A.P.O. 86, c/o Postmaster, San Francisco, California. This should help the people still writing to my old address to understand why I don't answer and save them some postage. I know most of them read PS so this will help.

I hear there've been some changes made there at PS and also that I won an original some time back. Just found out about a little while ago. If it's not too late to get the pic, just send any McWilliams or a Vestal. My thanks in advance for including this little note and for sending the original, if it isn't too late to expect said original.

Sincerely yours,

Ed Cox

CATCHING UP

2916½ Hampton St.,
Ashland, Ky.

Dear Editor:

Just finished the January issue of PLANET Stories. SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS by Anderson was by far one of the best stories I have read in a coon's age. All the other stories in this issue were pretty good too.

I missed out on Science-Fiction entirely for the period from 1940 to 1949. The war, and then going to school on the G.I. Bill, kept me tied up first one way and then another. Now I would like to catch up on my favorite literature. Would anyone like to sell out their collection or thin out their attic? Let me know what you have and price wanted.

Yours for better (if possible) issues,

JAMES R. HARRIS

HE KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS

4913 Rodman St., N.W.,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Ed:

Just dropping you a berating little note to let you know about the goodses and badses of your November ish.

I'm just a poor, young, sassy little kid but I think I know my STF field pretty well, so here is how I rate November:

- (1) THE ILLUSIONARIES
- (2) THE LAST LAUGH—If Zeke's science was so good, and old, why didn't he figure it out sooner (or maybe he wasn't up on his philosophy, eh?)?
- (3) PALIMPSEST—I rather disagree with Mr. Burwell's letter in LA VIZI, he said, "Do you subscribe to their doctrines of racial hatred?" I'm rather glad about the ending of the story. The African Negro was the only race to survive extinction in the atomic war. Maybe Mr. B. didn't dare write a more accusing letter, or maybe he's a K.K.K. himself, but I, myself, have no reason, whatsoever to hate or dislike any of the peoples of earth. As for that matter, none of the people I know do. Also, why should he gripe?
- (4) GRIM GREEN WORLD
- (5) HALFTRIPPER—This I like!
- (6) THE CONQUISTADORS COME
- (7) SWORDSMAN OF LOST TERRA
- (8) WRECK OFF TRITON—The helmets in the illo conflict
- (9) PIT OF NYMPHTHONS—Horribobble work, S. M. !!! Lowest of the Low . . .

Now, on LA VIZI, vive LA VIZI!!!

I agree with Mr. Meltzer on the fellow's handles, would they be able to pronounce the series of grunts and groans imposed on them, or would they go hide their heads in the nearest corner and cry?? Also, I have a pet author, by the name of Ray Bradbury, whom you might get to do a few yarns so send him a spacegram, will you?

In the few pages of THE PIT I didn't find any resemblance to the cover illo, although maybe I should have read more . . .

Then, too, Ed, old block, I'd like to see some yarns like PROTECTED SPECIES from the March '50 ASTOUNDING, so see what you can do? Bye, bem, old bop!

BEMently yours,

JON MEIGS

SOLOMON IS SORE

Dear Mal-de-mer:

That does it! Who the hell does this Scorso or Scorcho, or whateverhell his name is, think he is, the sadistic halfwit? I have three days mail (8 letters and 4 postcards) to answer, but this damndiot made me so mad I'm writing to you right this minute. This *person* (?) made the mistake of letting his address be printed on the childish perpetration which you so blithly printed, perhaps wishing to see him ripped limb from limb.

Certain people will say that I'm a conceited ass because I stick up for myself. If they do, they must regard defending oneself a show of conceit which it isn't! Maybe somebody else is writing a letter right now sticking up for me, but if I don't write this one right now and get the forthwith opinions out of my system I'm liable to do something drastic, like going down to Carpinteria and ridding fandom of this half-headednonentity. Carpinteria is only ten miles away; if this imbecile had anything to say to me, he might have come up and said it to my face, instead of sneaking off to his typewriter and getting his letter printed, hoping that I would read it along with the rest of fandom, and that said fandom

would promptly label me a fiend.

Well, well . . . He just finished the November ish of PS, but he won't review the stories because everybody else does that anyway. Don't let him kid you, he *can't* read the stories, and if he could he doesn't have the intelligence to review them anyway.

To hell if LA VIZI is going to pot! It's just as good now as it was in Spring 1950 ish, which is the first ish of old PS that I have. I'd say that LA VIZI is better now than it ever was, and if the Scorso snob doesn't like that, no one is going to tie him to the stake and make him read PLANET Stories just because he happens to be one of the minority that doesn't like the mag.

He can't say anything without fear of contradiction, because if I or anyone else doesn't like what he says, they'll contradict him to their heart's content.

Maybe this cretinish blockhead (pardon the superlativeness, I couldn't help myself) thinks that his letter will sufficiently hurt me so that I would withdraw from fandom and leave him to rave on at any other poor soul that crosses his path: I don't know, and I don't care, but Scorso seems to have read too much of Dennis Strong for the good of his feeble little mind. As I recall, Dennis Strong recanted his previous letter in March '51 PLANET, and perhaps Scorso will see that he is getting the attention that his inferiority complex desires, but that it is the type of attention that will never win him any friends.

I am now going to let the cat out of the bag. I have known Ken Scorso for about three years now and have always been on good terms, but when he went berserk and wrote that letter I was greatly shocked.

Leaving Scorso to the wolves, I arrive at the stories, etc. Anderson is *always* good, and H. B. Fyfe seems to have come up with another good'un.

I notice you have a Valigursky, illo. Man what an artist! He and Finlay and Cartier are my *favorites*. Blast my hide with dueterons! Here's another. What I wouldn't give for one of his originals! Vestal, of course is here too. Contrary to popular opinion, I like him. He has a very distinctive style.

Well, on to my other commitments,

WILLIAM

Bill Tuning, The Solomon of old S. B.

FRANKLY . . .

5 Clark Street,
Newburgh, New York

Dear Ed:

Aye, by the moon, Tenalp, I am a loyal PLANET follower. Your mag is the only one I read regularly because, (get this) it is the only real science-fiction magazine.

The best yarn in January's ish, is THE DANCERS by Wilton Hazzard. (Only a little, but darn good yarn, but why NO ILLUSTRATION?) I will look forward to seeing Hazzard's tales in coming issues.

Running neck-to-neck with DANCERS is CALLING WORLD 4. SARGASSO OF LOST STARSHIPS hits next place. The only stinkeroos are A FINE DAY FOR DYING, IT, and LAST CALL. (Walton, you're slipping. No more of these "white elephants," PLEASE!)

Yours truly,

BOB BURROS

P. S. Is Mavis Hartman male or female?

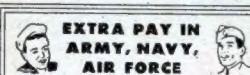
Ed's note: Certainly sounds like a fem to me.



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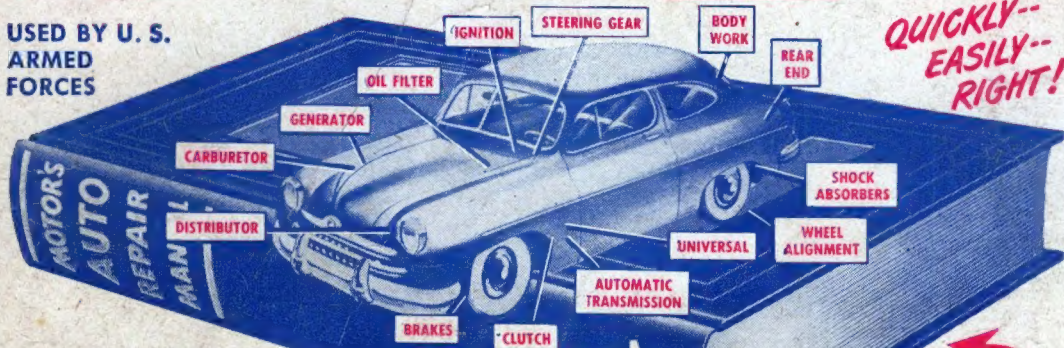
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